



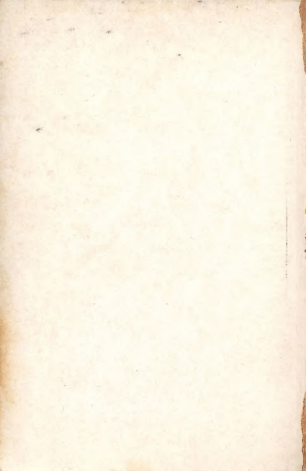
256

# western ROUNDUP!

Luke Short  
Ernest Haycox  
Max Brand  
Bennett Foster  
Peter Dawson  
James Warner Bellah  
A. B. Guthrie  
MacKinlay Kantor  
Alan LeMay  
Bret Harte  
O. Henry  
*AND OTHERS*



A BANTAM BOOK



## About

## WESTERN ROUNDUP

Build yourself a smoke, and stay a spell. We've fenced off a chunk of the old wild West, a thrill-packed land where—

- a gambling-saloon fights for justice . . .
- a shattered hand reaches for a gun . . .
- a buzzard wins what the posse loses . . .
- a dying desperado battles cattle kings . . .
- a white man watches an Indian die of  
thirst . . .
- an "honest" prospector sells a "worthless"  
mine . . .
- a major leads his men to slaughter . . .
- a minister preaches with bullets . . .
- a fancy cowpuncher gets too far from  
range . . .
- a dead man comes home . . .

and everywhere honest men tangle with ruthless outlaws, everywhere gun smoke climbs to the sky, everywhere there is the sound of cattle, the smell of horses, and the thrill of the West. For here are nineteen of the most action-jammed Western yarns you'll ever read.

So light up, and stay a spell.

## *About* THE COVER

The oath thrown in a barroom . . . the meeting in the dusty street . . . the quick-as-lightning draw . . . the roar of two guns. And raw, unbridled justice deals out its sentence of death. Artist Cliff Young illustrates the furious gun duel that symbolizes the smashing action of *Western Roundup*.

# WESTERN ROUNDUP



Edited by  
ARNOLD HANO



BANTAM BOOKS  
NEW YORK

A BANTAM BOOK

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## THIS IS MY PLEASURE

There's an awful lot of talk about why people like Westerns. To me it's a waste of time. It's like asking a kid why he likes the circus. He just likes it, that's all.

And I just like Westerns. Maybe I like them because they're good reading about a neglected hunk of awesome country. Maybe it's because a good Western usually carries a moral—don't laugh—at its end. It's nice to know that in the West, at least, honest men would forever rise to combat the forces of evil. Or maybe I like Westerns because the old West itself was a challenge, the last physical frontier in our country, where a man pitted himself against the land, against a merciless desert, against snow-whipped plains, against towering mountain ranges.

Any of these may be the reason—or all of them. But it doesn't really matter, just so long as Luke Short, Ernest Haycox, Bennett Foster and all the rest pick up the glorious tradition of Bret Harte, Mark Twain, 'Gene Rhodes, and Henry Wallace Phillips. Because then I can just go on liking Westerns.

These nineteen I like especially. I hope you do too.

—ARNOLD HANO



*A killer comes out of his grave!*

## STRANGE RETURN

MACKINLAY KANTOR

ONE-WAY FREEMAN—a sallow, slender, buck-toothed man—was waiting with two horses, when Stony Horn stepped into the moonlight. The Limited did not stop at Minaret except to discharge passengers from points east of El Paso; this was the first time it had stopped in many weeks. In the old days there would have been a crowd to see it, even though it stopped in the middle of the night. But the world was flowing past Minaret, these years.

Freeman tied his horses at the pole fence and walked toward the end of the train. The cars had slid past, clicking under way again, before he made out the figure of Stony Horn.

Mechanically, One-Way Freeman took off his hat. No one had ever done that to Stony Horn before, much as he had been loved or feared.

"Got the horses?" asked Stony. His voice sounded just the same. It was funny, because Freeman thought that his voice would have changed. It was asking a lot to expect a voice to be the same after five years.

"Sure," said One-Way. "I bought you a paint."

They shook hands with the certain awkwardness of men who had never done much handshaking, and now were reduced to it by the most poignant circumstance. "They're over here by the fence," said One-Way. He took a quick look around. No one had come down from the few kerosene lamps of the town.

The paint pony rubbed its shoulder against bleached

poles. One-Way's sorrel dozed, planning what he would do with his hind hoofs if anyone got around there. Stony walked over to the pinto and touched his nose. The pony stared with wide eyes through the moonlight. His ears turned slightly, but did not lie back, and he didn't wrinkle his muzzle.

"I'd forgotten how a stock saddle looked," said Stony. "They don't have stock saddles where I've been."

"Is that a fact?" said Freeman. "And that reminds me, there's been one thing I want to ask you, but it can wait a minute. We'd better head for Lucas Canyon. Somebody's liable to come down from that restaurant any minute."

Stony said, "That makes sense."

They didn't speak again until the shadow of Shaving Kettle Hill was black all around them. Then Stony broke the silence. "How many know what's true about me, Freeman?"

Freeman counted on his fingers. "Four, I guess. Johnny Coffin, and Osage, and Biscuit Flinch, and me."

"The old lady who brought me up used to say that four could keep a secret if three of them were dead." Horn looked at the moon. "Do you reckon any of the four you named are dead?"

Freeman nodded seriously. "We're dead and buried, spoon fashion, in a ditch. All of us."

A corner of the moon peered out at a curve of the trail and Stony's eyes glistened for a moment, and then were smooth and shadowed again. "I'm glad of that," he said. "I hanker after walking up that street more than anything else in the world."

FREEMAN swung his sorrel. "Stony, I never thought before. Ain't you got a trunk or valise or something?"

"I haven't got anything but a handkerchief and my guns," said Stony.

Not many people wore guns in sight any more, but Stony Horn had never carried his guns where the sun could shine on them. He carried two forty-fives inside the front band of his trousers; the flaps of the vest concealed their pearly butts, and Stony's hands could grow around those butts and drag them out in a few tenths of a second. Ordinarily he got the right-hand gun out first.

He told Freeman, "I had some little things on the train, but I gave them all to the porter. I don't like to be bothered with things. All I've got now is money in my belt. I've still got some money left."

Freeman said, "I guess doctors cost an awful lot of money."

"Who did you bury?" asked Stony Horn.

Their horses' hoofs crushed along the first slide beyond Shaving Kettle. "He had heart trouble," said Freeman. "Or maybe it was lungs. Anyhow, he was a fellow from Ohio that used to have a shack by Juanita Creek. He came out here for his health, but never seemed to find it. Biscuit Flinch and Johnny saw him laying dead when they were on their way back to Jove City."

He said, meditatively, "We gave you a pretty fine funeral, Stony; you ought to have been there to see it."

"It's funny," said Stony, "but I never did figure on getting buried. I figured on getting married, that's all."

In the old days Freeman would have had a coughing fit, but now he did nothing but lean forward with both hands clasped around his saddle horn as the sorrel picked its slow way up the slide.

"We used to ride out this direction, sometimes," said Stony. "We never took the slide, but stayed on the Shaving Kettle trail. Nights, I used to ride out here alone and listen to the deer scooting into the chaparral. Her father wouldn't have let her ride out here at night."

Freeman declared with conviction, "I guess I never did

feel romantic-inclined, not in my whole life. Anyway, no girl like Minnie would have looked at me."

"She looked at me," said Stony.

"That's a fact," Freeman added, "And there was something I wanted to ask you about——"

STONY HORN didn't hear him. When they reached the summit they waited to let their horses breathe. Far in the dark blue southwest, the Limited moaned painfully. The Limited couldn't creak through bow-knot canyons or angle its way up slides. It had to circle the flanks of two mountain ranges before it came to Jove City.

Stony Horn sat down on his haunches and shook a cigarette from its package. "You never smoke," he said to Freeman.

One-Way cleared his throat. It seemed that there were a dozen questions instead of one that he wanted to ask. "You never used to."

"Well," said Stony, "you lay around hospitals for a few years, and you'd smoke. I'll bet you'd smoke cigars or opium; no telling what you'd smoke."

He sighed and nodded toward the nearest range of hills—brown and purple in the moonlight. "I always did want to bring her up here at night."

One-Way Freeman began to work at his cinch strap. "Take Owen Treat, now. Not what I'd call a bad fellow."

"Kind of soft," said Stony, "and his old man is softer. So was Jim Woodford, before he got killed. They hired me as marshal of Jove City, and then kicked their heads off every time I laid out some monkey in the street. There was only one way to handle the stamp-mill crowd, and the thugs they sent to boss the town. I handled them that way. Old Man Treat and his kind thought I ought to speak gently."

Freeman quit fooling with his saddle and began to work on the bridle. It was an old bridle; it really didn't



need any repairs. "I know," he said, "but any girl might be tricked into thinking Owen Treat would make a good husband. He might have been soft but he was good-natured, not a bad-looking fellow."

"You talk like he was dead," said Stony.

"I guess there's no mistake about that," replied Freeman. "He got typhoid fever two years ago."

Stony measured his cigarette against the moon. "Is Old Man Treat still mayor?"

"You used to be mayor," Freeman said. "Your badge said marshal, but you used to be mayor. And Carney Robinson and the rest of them moved in as soon as they had moved you out. Robinson bought some mortgages against Old Man Treat, and he gave him an awful squeeze. Folks say that the old man died of a broken heart, and maybe that was it. Owen and his wife went down to the hotel at Juanita Crossing."

Stony Horn asked, "Wife?"

"They had a kid too," Freeman told his sorrel. "It was a girl, and mighty pretty. I guess you'd expect that."

Stony Horn got up slowly. He stamped on his cigarette. "I reckon you're trying to tell me bad news, One-Way."

Freeman nodded limply. "I would, if there was any use talking to the dead. As far as the town was concerned, you were dead, and as far as Minnie Woodford was concerned you were, too. They shot you from three directions over here in Lucas Canyon, and I know who did it. It was Carney Robinson and the Shelky boys and some more of their crowd. We found you, and sneaked you onto the train, and sent you east. But why did you stay five years?"

In the accusing silence which followed, Horn climbed into his saddle. "I was shot in the chest," he said, "and that healed up. So did my head. But it took them a long time to heal my thighbone. It had as many holes in it as

an old straw hat. That's the reason I stayed in New York. I wasn't going to come back except in one piece. I won't say that it wouldn't have made some difference if Minnie was promised to me, but she wasn't. She said I was a killer, and folks who live by the gun would die by the gun, and a lot of other foolishness she had learned from her father. We had a kind of fuss, and that was probably the reason why I let myself get ambushed over in Lucas. I didn't have my wits riding along with me."

It was the longest speech which Freeman had ever heard Stony make at a single time. It left him embarrassed and rather frightened as well. "I tell you, Stony," he said, "you can't blame her. We was sworn to the secret. A girl can't marry anybody that's nailed up in a box and buried with a fifty-dollar gravestone on top of him. And maybe she thought she'd get a good husband out of it."

"She got to be a widow, that's what she got," Stony whispered, "if what you tell me is true."

"I could tell you a lot more," said Freeman.

Stony muttered, "Let's ride. After all, maybe you're right. I reckon I've gone back to dust by this time."

He didn't look like a ghost, but he was a ghost, for all that. As they worked their way down toward the river, and his hot breath was sour inside him, he didn't see how in justice to himself and his friends he could have remained dead. The swift, bitter flowering of the youth had come while he was marshal of Jove City, and though revolvers had finally smudged out that flower, he had always played with the notion of resurrecting it into a second bloom.

During the final year of convalescence, when he spent long hours with his guns in front of the mirror of his hall bedroom, he had imagined that Jove City would be essentially as he had left it.

He was reborn, as surely as knotted new bones grew

where the old ones had been smooth. But at last he realized that the world had not been reborn with him. One-Way Freeman, prowling silently on the sure-footed sorrel, was a firm reminder that Stony Horn could never catch up with his past.

Stony had not been capable of writing to Minnie Woodford for a good six months after Carney Robinson and his men waited for him amid the red rocks of Lucas Canyon. For another year at least he had not wanted to tell her that he was alive. His pride stemmed mainly from the guns which had been his livelihood. But Minnie met that pride with nothing but scorn and resentment.

Her father had come from an Eastern state, wound in absurd civilization which strangled him at last. Minnie had had the same film of civilization through which she would not let Stony reach. . . .

The two riders crawled amid the tortuous winding of a dry creek bed; the moon went lower and couldn't find them. "One-way," said Stony, "I reckon I'm the only man who was ever able to take his money into the next world."

"If you'd trusted the bank," said Freeman, "you wouldn't have been able to. But as happened, it was only a question of opening your tin box and high-tailing to the express office at Tombstone."

IN THE first blue powder of dawn they swung from their horses in a grove of piñon trees, a hundred yards east of the Jove City cattle yards.

"I'll time it for ten o'clock," said Stony. "You take the horses and put them away, and go to bed if you want to. I won't start down that street until every mother's son of them is on it."

Freeman nodded. "I couldn't figure why you wanted me to meet you in Minaret, but now I see. The Limited went through here hours ago, and there's always folks at

the station. . . . Where are you going to be, in the meantime?"

Horn asked, "Has Clifton still got his lumber yard?"

"Yes," said Freeman, "and he still cheats people on shingles. But I guess it will be a comfortable place for you."

"I don't like to feel like a rat in a hole," said Stony Horn, "but I reckon I got to feel that way till ten o'clock. And one thing: don't you or any of the other boys do any shooting."

Freeman swung his leg across the sorrel and reached for the rein of the pinto pony. "See you at ten o'clock." Then he and the horses went north. Stony slid past the cattle pens and sidetracks, in the pale half-light, toward Clifton's deserted lumber yard.

He lived in a black corner, deep in a well of piney odors, until the hands of his watch declared that it was ten o'clock. During that time he accused Minnie Woodford with all the earnestness of which he was capable. He indicted her on fifty-seven counts and tried her, and found her innocent, and then he accused her all over again.

His fingers felt the guns under their encasing fabric. His lips tightened, relaxed in a smile, and tightened forever. He strode up the dim runway past piles of resinous lumber; he could smell the gum soaking out of wood. Coils of chicken wire were stacked on a framework.

He walked out into the sunlight, into the breath of Jove City, and already the lumber yard was ten miles behind him.

Two empty milk cans and a box of beer bottles lay on the sidewalk in front of Brandimier's pool hall. Ed Brandimier was standing in the door, looking up and down the street.

Stony called, "Ed!" and when he said it there was a guttural pride in his throat.

Ed looked at him; one pink arm slid slowly off the doorjamb. Ed became a fat pink-and-white dummy.

STONY HORN walked out into the street. It was his street, he admitted to himself. Nobody else had ever written a signature among those wheel ruts.

On his left someone kept gaping, "*Look at that*" and "*Look-a-there*" . . . It was the voice of a half-wit, of tumbled brains trying to orient themselves to this new and unequivocal order of things. Stony's hands swayed easily before him as he went; his fingers arched toward his body. The flaps of his vest were solid before his belt. There was no bulge.

Once he had been an orphan in Colorado; once he had been an invalid in New York; but now he was a giant towering over any building in Jove City. Once he had even gone to school, and there he had learned a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. He had recited it, too, no matter how frightened he was, and it sat in his brain always. *Under his slouched hat left and right he glanced.*

Stony Horn's pounding boots said, "Stonewall Jackson. Ha." All around him people were yelling, or tumbling silently into covered doorways. For a fleeting second Horn winked his eyes shut. Already he was passing the first corner, and that was the street where Minnie Woodford used to live, and he was trying to ward off the eternal pain in her eyes. *Under his slouched hat left and—*

Carney Robinson's face kept growing and swelling closer, pushing into Stony's consciousness like a specter which would not be put down. Stony's fingers began to curve; he felt the squeeze of muscles along his taut forearms. Behind Robinson were other faces. Abernathy's saloon.

Horn said, "Oh, Carney."

Robinson's puffy eyes had brown lids that were made of wrinkled tin, and couldn't open any wider.

"Don't pull those guns," said Stony Horn.

The big yellow hands congealed in mid-air.

"Look down, Carney," Horn said, "down at my shoe." And he didn't look down himself, but his right leg twisted forward to expose the hole in the upper rim of the laced boot. "That was the lowest one; it went into the calf of my leg. It didn't bother me, but the other ones were higher."

The crowd was a dead mass of solid bodies and wax faces, none of them alive.

"I guess everybody's here," said Stony. "I see Jud Jennaway and Charlie Munster and the Shelky boys. It don't take news long to travel here, not even all the way from the lumber yard." He said, "I clumb out of my grave before sunup. Come here, Carney."

The image moved, and stopped, and moved once more.

"Keep coming, Carney." He held his palms pressed against his groins as if a pain were chewing him there. He took the black guns out of Robinson's holsters, and the hand of One-Way Freeman reached from somewhere to accept this first offering.

Stony grasped Robinson's big shoulders and spun him around and looked intently into his face. "Before to-night, Carney! Unless you're married; then you've got till tomorrow. I don't care who you take with you, but if your friends stay they won't like it here any more."

He pushed past Robinson and walked directly toward the curb. The crowd scattered, stumbling and blundering. Someone gave vent to a faint cheer. People were trying to reach out and grasp Stony's hand. He disregarded them, because he thought that shaking hands was dangerous and a waste of time. Then he was inside the Morgan House.

The proprietor had a Scandinavian mouth and eyes of no particular nationality, and sleeve holders of soiled lavender elastic. . . . Stony's voice was saying casually,

through the smoky, thrice-breathed air, "Give me my old rooms at the side."

The Scandinavian mouth wriggled and did funny things, and a drop of water fell from the man's jaw.

"Oh, what ails you?" cried One-Way Freeman in the distance. "This ain't no ghost. It's Stony Horn, and he's come back to town."

IT WAS eight o'clock that night when the city fathers trooped home from their final conference with Stony. On the stair landing, Osage Tilden left off whittling matches. He came up to Stony's door, where Freeman sat on a tilted chair. "The Shelky boys lit out for Mexico," he said.

"Jud Jennaway lit out for further than that," announced One-Way. "I seen him at the depot this afternoon, and he had a satchel with him. He figured maybe he'd join the army and go help civilize the Filipinos."

Osage grinned slyly. "Filipinos are like Apaches, I reckon. They might make a meal off him."

Freeman said, "Probably they wouldn't like ptomaine poison any better than we would," and then Stony Horn came out of his bedroom with Biscuit Flinch and Johnny Coffin.

"Come in to the setting-room," he ordered. "The office of mayor has been declared vacant. I always thought Coffin was the best name for a furniture-and-undertaking man that I ever heard, and I reckon it might do for a mayor too. Anyway, Johnny's father is going to saddle up and try it. Cooper Clagg has resigned as sheriff, and Abbot Bolesby says he'll make a satisfactory one."

"Is that all?" asked Osage.

"There was some talk about a police force," Biscuit Flinch told him. "Do you think you're eligible? There was talk, too, about the voters going to the polls—to make all this kind of legal—and I hope you boys give them an honest election."

Stony said, "Let's eat."

"Didn't you eat?" asked One-Way. "I saw enough grub carried in there to feed a round-up."

"Not much. I was too busy being a politician. I don't like politics, but I reckon that sometimes it's necessary."

They called for a Chinese boy and sat down to wait. "Real estate will take a tumble," Johnny Coffin predicted.

"Why is that?" asked Stony.

"Well, there'll be a lot on the market when Carney Robinson's stuff is turned loose. That alone ought to take down the price a peg or two. They say he owns twelve new business properties, let alone the hotel at Juanita Crossing."

One-Way Freeman gulped, and his thin lip drew down over his front teeth.

Stony Horn was on his feet, hands twitching, his gaze turned on Freeman, his face as expressionless as a pie tin. "You didn't tell me that," he said.

The other men knew that some ugly force had leaped within that room, and still they didn't know what it was about.

"Stony," said One-Way, "we never did talk about real estate."

Stony's hands pushed against the front of his vest. "I want to be correct on this, boys. Are you dead certain Carney Robinson owns that hotel at Juanita?"

For a moment no one answered. Their silence was assent in itself.

"She's just a widow, Stony," Freeman said. "Just—"

A Chinese waiter grinned in the doorway, but Stony ordered him back down stairs. "I don't give a damn if she's five widows," he said. "So she runs the hotel that Carney Robinson owns! And do you reckon he owns her, along with it? I know one piece of real estate that'll never go on the market. I wasn't good enough for her when I



was here before: I made my living by killing! But I never made it by murder like Carney did. Get the horses, somebody."

"We haven't eaten," said a voice.

"We're riding to Juanita Crossing," said Stony. "If anybody thinks he's hungry he can take along a sausage and roast it when we get there, on the end of a stick. A long stick, too."

His glance lashed them out of the room and down the hall and through the lobby. He came close behind, whipping them into their saddles without another word. Even the black-chinned Osage Tilden, who knew little enough about justice, would have admitted that there might be a horrid justice in what Stony was about to do. But every man shivered and marveled at the thought of visiting such justice on the girl who had been Minnie Woodford.

THEY TOOK the road due north toward the dark flats of desert land, and the speckled stars tried to build shadows under their horses' feet, but failed. They rode with dry wind on their faces; no one dared remark that it was good to be riding together again.

Flinch said, after they had passed the dry bottom, "Did Carney go?"

Twenty hoofs clicked softly among the stones.

"I didn't see him again," said Stony Horn.

"Nobody seen him," Johnny Coffin declared.

"Well," Flinch offered humbly, "he'll go, pronto. But in the hotel lobby I heard someone say he had holed in all afternoon up at his mother's place, absorbing liquor."

A pale meteor left Arizona and fell somewhere in Mexico. "If he's drunk," said Stony, "I wouldn't touch him—not unless I had to. I never dropped a drunk man yet. When we get back to town we'll do some asking."

The hotel had been built when the railroad was first

laid across those rocks, and a branch line wound away into the Aveiro Mountains. But the Aveiro silver had been spread too thin, and now the hotel waited under the stars for guests who, mainly, did not come.

It had one kerosene light swinging opposite the blistered sign that still boasted of rooms and chicken dinners. There was a sad row of piñons near the driveway, and the five men swung to the ground at the edge of a thicket beyond the trees.

Stony dusted his hands on his trouser legs. "Reckon I'll be going in."

"Alone?" growled Osage.

"Yes."

"She's got a hand. Some monkey Carney Robinson had there to keep an eye on the hotel."

Stony didn't answer. They watched his dark shape move through the mesquite toward the cleared ground.

A MAN opened the side door of the building. They could see his fat shoulders framed against the light inside. "Hey. Who's out there?" Suddenly it seemed very black in that driveway, even with the kerosene lamp winking bravely above.

Horn went forward, rapidly, across the hard sand. He said, "Outside, Mister!"

The man tried to close the door. Stony's bullet plowed the wooden step in front of him.

"Outside!"

The guard came slowly, cringing, hands shoved above his head. The lights of the dining-room were beyond, and the watching men could see Stony whirl him around, seize his gun, and push him toward the road. "Walk toward those trees. You're being watched. Anybody else inside?"

"She's there," whispered the man. "Just her and—"

One-Way Freeman drew a long breath, as Horn

stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The others went forward to seize the disarmed guard, who was shuffling uncertainly in the roadway.

This is a story about Stony Horn and a doll with a broken leg.

Minnie Woodford had blue eyes, but now they were eyes that measured deeper than any mine shaft in the world . . . clouded with the turgid hopelessness of old water, standing there in darkness for so long.

People had warned Stony that some day the hammer of a gun would catch, for one split second, against his clothing. The hammer had never caught, yet. He had put his guns back as soon as he had fired at the doorstep, and he did not draw them again as he walked into the hotel.

He said, "Howdy."

She was standing at the kitchen door with a revolver in her hand. She looked at him, and her face was dry as a bone.

He laughed and spoke again. "Howdy, baby." It wasn't exactly caressing, the way he said it.

But the baby heard him, and she thought he was talking to her. She was quite a young lady—twenty-three months old. Her mother had named her Grace, but probably she called her "Baby" most of the time. . . .

Grace ran out into the big room where Stony was standing. Ordinarily she wasn't allowed there. People sat at tables in that room, occasionally, and drank things out of pretty bottles. But still Grace's mother was unreasonable, and kept her in the kitchen.

She ran past Minnie and held up her doll for Stony Horn to see. A capable surgeon, examining the pulverized celluloid where someone had stepped upon the doll, would have placed the injury at nothing less than a compound fracture of the left tibia, and possibly the fibia as well.

Minnie's gun clattered to the floor, but it didn't go off. The baby looked at Stony very soberly. "Dolly hurt," she said.

One-way Freeman had told him about a kid . . . Somehow he had expected to find Minnie alone. . . .

"Dolly bust," Grace told him sadly.

His lithe hand was awkward and fumbling as he reached down and took the doll. He asked, "What's she trying to say?"

Minnie whispered, "You were dead."

"Dolly bust!" wailed Grace.

"Oh, I see!" exclaimed Stony. "The dolly busted her leg, huh? Say, busted legs are right in my line." The dirty doll shook in his hand as if, suddenly, it were alive. "Right in my line," he repeated.

Grace put one finger upon the battered crust of celluloid. "Hurt," she told him.

"I'll say!" said Stony. "It's plumb busted. But we can fix it. Splints and bandages—they're just the things for a busted leg."

He felt in his pocket for a handkerchief which wasn't there. He did find a pencil, and snapped it into two pieces. Then he reached under his belt beside the heavy revolvers, and drew out the front tail of his blue shirt. . . . Grace watched him with interest. He bit into the hem of the shirt and tore off a long strip of the pale blue cotton.

"It spoils shirts to do that, but I reckon we've got to have bandages."

UNDoubtedly the celluloid bones would knit, splinted so neatly with broken pencil and knotted blue rags.

"There," Stony said, "that's what I call a major operation." He rose to his feet and carefully tucked the shirt around his waist. "I came here to burn this place," he re-

marked to no one in particular. And then he took three other steps forward and put his arms around Minnie.

She turned her face away, but too many things had happened to her to let her cry.

"Minnie," he said, over and over. "Minnie. . . ."

She gasped:

"You were dead and buried! I didn't care much whether I—"

"Is Carney Robinson a friend of yours?" he asked dully.

"He foreclosed on this hotel and took it over. He did his best to freeze me out because I—I wouldn't—All I've had lately was a job here—a job that gave us something to eat. There wasn't anything else to do. You were dead, Stony; so was my father and so was Owen. Everybody was dead."

Grace was talking a lot of gibberish to her doll. She was only a blur as Horn looked at her.

"This little colt ought to be in bed," he muttered.

"They told me you'd come back, Stony. But I couldn't believe it. I was there when they buried you."

His arms came away from her suddenly, and now he was fumbling inside his vest.

"Here."

She looked at the bills in her red hand. "What is it?"

"You take this little colt, and go away from here. You used to have a sister back in Missouri, didn't you? I reckon you and the kid could be mightily contented back there."

She whispered, "One time I wouldn't have you. Now I guess it's the other way around."

Stony's words came like blunted bullets. "I won't ask you to stand it. Someday somebody will drop me. It can't miss. It'll come. I don't want you to be in on it. . . ."

His voice was softer: "Right away we'll take you to the depot to catch the eleven-thirty train. There'll just be

time, if you work fast and round up whatever little stuff of yours and the kid's you want to keep."

He went to the door to call his boys, but his eyes told her nothing more when he glanced back over his shoulder. "I said that I was going to burn this shack, and I'm sure going to do it. You better hustle up, Minnie."

THE ISOLATED facts were jumbled very loosely that night, and no one has ever been able to figure just why they fell the way they did. The Supreme Juggler of Facts must accept the entire responsibility.

He juggled Minnie and Grace into the barren little station to await the eastbound train, and juggled Stony Horn back to the Morgan House with only One-Way Freeman to attend him. They were at the desk, and Stony was buying cigarettes, when Carney Robinson—drunker and crazier than he had ever been in his life—came plunging through the door.

Stony Horn told him, "If you've got hold of any new guns, Carney, don't pull them." But Carney Robinson was drunk and—

When One-Way Freeman and the hotel clerk stepped out from behind the desk, Carney was dead. At first they thought that Stony Horn was dead, too, but he twisted himself on one elbow and tried to get up, and fell back again.

It was a clear night. The sound of gunfire could carry a long way, even though a departing train had set the canyon echoes to wailing. The doctor was just tacking a wad of gauze against Stony's chest when the hotel door flew open for the fiftieth time in five minutes, and Minnie dropped on her knees beside the new marshal.

His eyes were closed. "Didn't the train stop?" he wanted to know.

"Yes," she cried. "It stopped . . . something stopped

inside of me, too. I wasn't sure you'd need me, but now I am."

He asked, his eyes squeezing shut, "Where's the baby, and the doll with the busted leg?"

"Old Gramp Tilden is taking care of them down at the depot. I—I'll bring them up here the first moment you'll let me." Her eyes left Stony's face and found the doctor's in the crowd above.

The doctor jerked at his little beard. "Two inches lower, Minnie, and— But it looks high and safe to me. If he doesn't get pneumonia."

Minnie whispered, "No, he won't get pneumonia. He won't get—anything. I'll be with him—" and then One-Way Freeman lifted her up.

People carried Stony to his room; the doctor followed, and so did Minnie. Downstairs, men nudged Carney Robinson with their boot toes and tried to solve this mystery. The guns had talked so simultaneously that it was hard to understand matters. Carney Robinson, drunk, matching Stony Horn on the draw! No one thought that such a thing could be; and Stony's reputation bore a tiny blemish from that day forth.

Osage Tilden picked up one of Stony's guns from the floor, and they all noticed the torn threads of blue cloth caught on the hammer. Even then, nobody knew quite what it meant. And upstairs, when they removed Stony's shirt, no one except Minnie knew why that ragged seam was there.

*Would he lie for a trigger kid?*

## THE DOCTOR KEEPS A PROMISE

LUKE SHORT

IN THE seven years since Mason Weber stepped down into the thick dust of Warms' street and received the microscope, the roped trunk and the seven heavy medical books handed him by the freighter who had brought him, he already had made his fight and lost it. It was the kind of fight only a shy man can make and a sensitive one can realize he has lost. He lost it when the county elected Dr. Caslin as its coroner, leaving Mason Weber to wonder who the thirty-two people were who voted for him instead of for the older doctor.

He had found out in the two years since. They were men in bib overalls, and their women, the farmers from the country out under the San Dimas bench where the big Spade outfit, the Bearpaw, the Seven X and the Bib K had shoved them. They were the Mexican families whose adobes had been pushed to the farthest edge of town and who still called Warms by its old name, San Antonio de Jacona. And they were two bartenders from different saloons, both old men, who came to Dr. Weber because he knew good whisky from bad and demanded it of them in quart bottles.

Save for these two, the rest were humble people, mostly unwanted people, farmers in the cattle country. The town, loyal to the big outfits that gave them a living and hated hoemen, had done something to these people who were Dr. Weber's patients. They were so little used to



asserting themselves that unless he heard them ascend the steps to the tiny waiting room above Sais' harness shop and went out to them, they would sit there a whole afternoon, talking in whispers and trying to keep from shuffling their thick-soled shoes. But they were his people and he was their doctor, for the town and the big outfits had shoved him into obscurity, along with his patients.

He heard these steps this afternoon, however, and opened the door into the waiting room. The girl was standing away from the door and behind her the sun poured through the single curtainless window, so that he could not see her face.

HE SQUINTED a little at the glare and stood aside, a slim, not tall man in wrinkled trousers and a white shirt whose cuffs and collar had been twice turned. He had skipped yesterday's shave, so that the pale wedge of his face seemed more slack than it was, and its expression was musing and indifferent and faintly proud. With his free hand he buttoned his vest and with the other he made a gesture of half-remembered elegance as he said, "Step inside, please," in a voice that was still thick with sleep or whisky.

"No, it's not for me," the girl said quickly. "It's—can you come with me?"

Dr. Weber closed his eyes and inclined his head in assent.

"No, you mustn't!" she said hurriedly. There was something so urgent in her voice that it made him pause as he began to turn and look at her. "I mean, nobody must see you. Can't you pretend you're going somewhere else?"

"Just where am I going?" he asked quietly. He had a dry, impatient manner of speech that antagonized people, and in that moment he realized it again and wished he had spoken more gently.

She did not answer for long seconds, and he took two slow steps into the room and to the side of it, so that he could see her face. Where she stood now, the sunlight cut across her chest in a hard and merciless way that did not flatter her. It brought out the spots on her cheap bombazine dress and raised the veins in her red and work-worn hands. Above the gash of sunlight was the kind of face with which he had come to be familiar, the face of a farm woman. It was too thin and too angular, as if its blood were used up before it could feed the flesh that lay beneath, and it had a dignity that was its own beauty. She was looking at him, wanting to speak and afraid to, her blue eyes gauging a chance that she was reluctant to take.

"Now, what is it you want?" Dr. Weber asked, and this time his voice was kindly, purposely so.

"I've got to trust you," she began. Her voice was calmer now, too. "I—he's in trouble, my—this man. I don't know what kind, only he's hiding and he's hurt."

"Gunshot?"

"Yes." She kept her eyes steady. "Will you help him, come to him?"

"All right. Where is he?"

"You can't come to him. That's just it." She took a deep breath and looked down at her hands and he saw the shudder move her body. "I guess the hiding is more important than the wound. He thinks so. You'll have to wait until dark."

"Where is he shot?"

"The chest."

"Then it can't wait."

She nodded, saying nothing. Dr. Weber went into his dark office and got his bag. Before he closed it he corked the bottle of whisky on the desk and slipped it in the bag, putting on his coat afterward.

She was still standing there, watching the door, when he came out.

"Maybe we can manage it," he said. "Where is he?"

"You don't understand," the girl replied. "I guess I shouldn't have come. You see, he says they'll be after him. And if they ask you where he is, you'll have to tell them, won't you?"

"Not unless I want to."

"Why wouldn't you want to?" the girl said with quick bitterness. "If he's done something they shot him for, why shouldn't you turn him in?"

Dr. Weber's voice was edged with asperity and impatience as he said, "I'm not a sheriff, miss. I'm a doctor. You've got my promise, for what it's worth."

She hesitated only a moment and then told him where to come. Afterward, he went out, leaving her there in the waiting room as she requested, so they would not be seen together.

Over on the street the wooden awnings caught and held the midafternoon heat, and Dr. Weber carried his hat in his hand. Passing Prince's Keno Parlor, he nodded briefly to the two punchers in chairs back-tilted against the wall, and they said just as briefly, "Hello, Doc." He listened for any note of hostility in their greeting and he could find none, only a kind of unbending indifference that was almost dislike. The sour, smoky scent of alcohol made a cool wedge of air in front of the swing doors as he came abreast of them. Murdo McFie on his way back to his bank upstreet came through the swing doors in time to see Doc and to pause on the sill, letting the doors nudge his back. The pause was timed so that Dr. Weber had to go ahead, and Doc understood. He walked past without a check in his rather deliberate stride, and McFie said "Afternoon, Doctor," in the kind of neutral voice that Dr. Weber had come to accept. He was even

smiling over it as he turned at the corner toward McGovern's stable.

Once on his horse he followed her directions, striking south out of town. When he was out of sight of it over the low ridge, he left the road, swinging west, the reek of the sage and dust hot in his nostrils. When he came to the arroyo, wide and deep and dry, he sloped into it and clung close under the right bank, cutting back toward town. Her landmark was a black and rusty stove dumped into the arroyo years ago when this was the edge of town. Beyond he took the next trail out of the arroyo and found himself in a clump of cottonwoods and seedlings, and he tied his horse among them, afterward crossing an irrigation ditch and walking through a small field toward a cluster of adobe buildings. The sun lay hot on each shoulder blade, so that he straightened up to ease the cloth away from his back.

A Mexican was squatting in the shade of a low adobe building, watching his approach. He rose and took off his hat and opened the door beside him and Dr. Weber stepped into a black, windowless room smelling of stirred dust. The heat here beat at his face, rushing past him as if glad to escape.

HE STOOD there a moment, letting his eyes relax for the darkness, and then he discovered she was beside him. "Over here. On this corn."

"Haven't you a lantern?" he asked.

The girl spoke to the Mexican and he disappeared. Dr. Weber went across the room. The man was lying on clean blankets under which had been stuffed some hay. The bed itself was a heap of field corn leveled out. There was a dry rustle of shucks underfoot as Dr. Weber took off his coat and waited for the lantern.

Then the girl stood beside him, and he looked at the man. He was a young man, in fever, breathing with a

kind of rasping difficulty that sounded ominous. He had a tough, wild face, burned a ruddy bronze, and he kept licking cracked lips. Doc's glance took in the levis and blue shirt, washed and sunfaded to a gray and patched carefully with goods of the same faded color.

"Your brother?" he asked the girl.

"Yes," she said. "He's—" She paused. "He's young and foolish and—and desperat!" she said softly.

Afterward, he asked for hot water, and when it came he set to work. The brother roused fighting, but when he understood it was the doctor, he lay back unsmiling, fear in his eyes. The bullet had shattered the lower rib on the right side, and it was lodged deep in the muscles that flanked the spine. It was a wicked and long afternoon for the boy, and it took all the whisky in the doctor's bag to numb the pain; and when the probing was done he lay there gaunt and gray and shrunken. He had not allowed himself a scream.

Dr. Weber was surprised to find it was dark when he was through. He was shaking and he wanted a drink, and he walked over to the door, reaching for his pipe. He had not looked at the girl, had not spoken to her, save to give her orders, but now she was holding his coat in her hands, waiting to help him on with it.

"That was pretty rough," Dr. Weber said, looking closely at her. Her nostrils were a little pinched, and her upper lip was beaded with sweat.

"Yes," she murmured huskily. "Is it always that bad on them?"

DR. WEBER hadn't meant it that way. In his inarticulate and gentle way he was trying to tell her that it had taken courage to watch it. But she contrived to shoulder aside his sympathy, and he smiled a little at it.

"You're not from around here," he said. "I haven't seen you."

"We had a place out under the Bench, but we lost it," the girl said levelly. "I'm in the kitchen at the Stockman's House." She moved a little, pulling up her shoulders which were sagging. "Will he be all right, Doctor?"

Dr. Weber shrugged and said, "Get word to me if there's any change; I'll be here later tonight," and went out. The Mexican had his horse outside, and he mounted and rode back to town, this time by the dark wagon road that threaded its way to the main street. Through his weariness his mind kept thrusting back to the girl. It was not so much what she had said to him, for that was negligible; it was what she had left unsaid. There had been no reference to his promise of secrecy, and that was something a man would not have abstained from in her place. He turned this over in his mind, remembering those kitchen-worn hands, and he thought he knew why she hadn't spoken. Those poor farmers had to have faith in others, since they could not buy help.

He put up his horse at McGovern's and headed up-street, turning into Prince's Keno Parlor for the drink that had been on his mind these many hours.

Almost the whole of the saloon was clustered at the bar when Doc entered. There was a monotonous argument going on, with almost everyone having his say. Tim Prince, who spotted Doc before either of his bartenders, came over and set the bottle on the bar, and then stood there, his gray head turned, listening to the talk.

Doc took his drink, and then a word spoken louder than the others narrowed his attention.

"Did they say holdup?" he asked Tim Prince.

"Yeah. The stage was stuck up last night just as it pulled onto the Bench. One robber, Gus Envers, he's the driver, threw down on him and hit him, and then this fella cut loose and knocked Gus off the stage top."

"Kill him?"

"Gus? No. The fall knocked him out. After he come to, he made it to the Spade."

Doc raised his eyebrows and looked down at his drink.

"Funny thing," Prince said slowly. "When the Spade boys come back to the stage the express box was looted. The robber got it."

"He couldn't have been hit bad then," Doc observed.

"He bled enough so the Spade boys tracked him back to town."

"Here?" Doc said slowly.

"That's right. He's here in Warms. So is the loot."

Doc said nothing and paid for his drinks and Tim Prince walked back to the group. Doc went up to the group and listened to them. Four dusty Spade riders, their backs to the bar, were arguing.

One of them said, "All right. Sure he could have went back up the arroyo. You can't track in blowed sand the way you can on the sage flats. Only if he went up it instead of into town, where'd he go?"

"He's here," another Spade puncher said. "Sure as hell, he's here."

"I bet he ain't," a new voice said. "I bet you could turn him up in some of them hoemen's shacks under the Bench."

"Are you sure he was hit bad?" a townsman asked.

"Gus heard the breath slam out of him, he says. He grunted."

"A man'll do that when he's hit in the leg."

"No, he won't," the Spade rider said. "He'll howl or he'll swear. When he's hit bad, he may try to yell but he can't."

Doc cleared his throat. He cleared it in such a way that the puncher, who was going to elaborate, stopped in mid-gesture and looked at Doc. The others caught that glance and shifted their attention to Doc, too.

"That's nonsense," Doc said. His voice was dry and sharp, although he did not intend it to be. "If he was hit bad, he would not have stayed to rob. He would hit for the hills to hide."

HE CEASED speaking and nobody said anything for a moment. "All right," the puncher said, then. Again there was silence, and Doc turned on his heel and walked out.

Outside, he walked slowly, listening to a small warning voice inside him. This was narrowing down, and when it did he would not have the liking of these people to bolster him.

He went back to his office and lighted the lamp and closed the door into the waiting room. After two drinks of whisky he took down his books and read all he could find on gunshot wounds.

He was reading this when he heard the steps on the stairway. He carefully picked up his lamp and was standing in the office doorway when they came in. There was Charlie Coulter and Ferd Willis, one from the Bearpaw and the other Spade's foreman. There was Hod Stro-snider, the express agent. He was a Texas man, thin-lipped and bleach-eyed, and his bones were too big for the weight of him, and he stank of horses, not the way a rider does, but the way a dirty hostler does. And there was Murdo McFie, from the bank, solid and square and deliberate, with level, curious eyes. They greeted Dr. Weber and he set the lamp on the table and Murdo McFie, their leader, sat on one of the two chairs in the room and put his hands on his knees. The rest stood.

"You can't all be sick," Dr. Weber said, smiling.

"Hardly," McFie said. He looked over at Ferd Willis and Ferd looked at the floor in a way that might have been his diffident manner, but Dr. Weber knew was not.

"You've heard about the holdup, Doctor," McFie stated.



"I heard," Doc replied. He let it go at that.

McFie looked down at his hands. "Dr. Caslin hasn't had a call for a gunshot wound today. I wondered if you had."

Dr. Weber shook his head. "No. That would be pretty obvious, wouldn't it?"

"Wouldn't it?" McFie echoed. He was watching Dr. Weber with a steady gaze. There was no judgment, one way or the other, in his square face. He said, "You didn't have a sick call today, then?"

"Yes, I had three."

"Out of town, I mean."

"Yes. Three."

McFie was silent a moment. "You should know a gunshot wound when you see one, shouldn't you?"

"They aren't easy to mistake."

"No." McFie rose. "If you are asked to handle one, you'll report it, of course."

"To the sheriff. Naturally."

McFie was still looking at him. "The bank lost a little money in that holdup, Doctor. It was insured by the express company, of course." He inclined his head toward Strosnider, who had not taken his gaze from Doc's face. "Still, it means higher rates in the future," McFie explained, and added almost as an afterthought, "Then there's attempted murder to consider."

"I'll report anything that looks suspicious," Dr. Weber said.

"Yes. Good night." McFie looked at the others. "Coming?"

Charlie Coulter stirred from the window sill where he was sitting and came toward the door.

Hod Strosnider leaned against the wall and said to McFie, "I think we'll stay and learn about gunshot wounds."

McFie looked at Dr. Weber and nodded and he and

Charlie Coulter went out. They tramped down the stairs at McFie's solid pace and Dr. Weber heard it distinctly, for the others, Strosnider and Ferd Willis, were silent until the sound of footsteps died.

When Dr. Weber looked back at Strosnider, he saw something in the Texan's eyes that did not surprise him. It was something other than indifference and it was something beyond dislike; and it quickened Dr. Weber's blood.

Strosnider said meagerly, "Where were those three calls, Doc?"

Doc didn't answer. He was watching them, his face shaped in a still half-smile.

Ferd Willis lounged out of the shadow. "McGovern said you got your horse around four. And you bought a drink at eight."

"That's four hours you were gone," Strosnider said carefully.

"Four hours is a long time," Doc murmured.

"You could reach Bearpaw, but you don't go there," Strosnider went on. "You could've short-cut to Cotton's place, only you don't go there either. Or you could've made them hard-scrabble outfits under the Bench. All in four hours. Which was it?"

"Let's call it the people under the Bench."

Willis smiled slowly. "You rode south, Doc. That's north."

Doc hesitated a minute. "So I lied," he said to them both.

Strosnider lounged off the wall and carefully removed the chair from in front of him before he spoke, before he looked up at Doc.

"I never liked you, Doc," he said quietly. "None of us do. You walk a little too proud for a man to buy you a drink, and you love them farmers a little too much." He took a step toward Dr. Weber, and Willis shifted his feet.

"It wasn't McFie that lost that money. It was insured with me, with the express company." He paused, his eyes still and wicked, but when he spoke again his voice was mild: "You show us where he is. We'll find the money."

"Maybe you better find him, too, then," Doc murmured.

"Think a minute, before you get so stiff-necked," Willis said.

"I've thought," Dr. Weber said gently. "Get out!"

Strosnider hit him in the face. He staggered back against Willis, and then was sent to his knees by a blow behind the ear from Willis. He caught Strosnider's kick by rolling his shoulder, and then a rap across his skull sent him into a warm, wet, aching sleep.

CLOSE TO daylight, her brother's fever broke. He saw her, smiled, turned his head and died while she was still smiling at him. Afterward, because she had nobody to whom she could turn, she went to Dr. Weber's office. She found him in a corner on his back, his feet tangled in the rungs of a chair.

After she dragged him into the office and onto the leather couch, it took her a long time to think of whisky. Even when she did she was afraid it would choke him, but she tried it. Afterward, his eyelids shuttled back and he looked at her and then at the ceiling and then at her again.

She said, from down on her knees beside him, "Hadn't I better get Dr. Caslin?"

"You stay here," he said. Presently he asked her to help him sit up and he grunted a little as she did. Afterward he took a tumbler of whisky and held it in both hands while she cut away his shirt and bathed his back. She didn't talk and Doc was glad for that.

She got him a clean shirt from the bottom drawer of his desk and he thanked her through lips as thick as his

fingers, and put it on. She stood in front of him then, her hands at her sides. "It was all because of Dave, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Dave who?"

"Bechdolt. That's our name. They beat you because you wouldn't tell them where he is."

"How is he?" Doc asked gently, his eyes musing.

"He died this morning," she said quietly.

DOC LOOKED up at her weary eyes and then looked away.

"Yes, I guessed he would. I'm sorry."

He took her hand and pulled her to the couch and she sat beside him. Neither of them talked immediately. Finally, she said, "I guess maybe that was the only way out, wasn't it?" in a dull, weary voice.

"He was too young," Doc said gently.

"Yes."

"Tell me about him."

The girl leaned back and closed her eyes. "There's nothing to tell. It's like a match that doesn't strike clean, only sputters. We took our money and tried to homestead out under the Bench. Some cattle outfit—Spade, the Bearpaw, the Bib K—burned out our stand of wheat last fall. They did that to some others, too, but we had nothing to fall back on."

"So you got a job in town," Doc prompted.

"Yes. I tried to earn enough for seed this spring, but I couldn't. Dave couldn't get a riding job with any of the big outfits. They wanted to break us, drive us out."

"He held up the stage for seed money?"

She nodded slightly. "He was bitter. We couldn't get a loan because we weren't proved up and our only possessions were a team, a plow and a tent. Dave knew about the money shipments on the stage. When he held up the stage he wasn't going to shoot. He told me. But when the driver shot him, he thought he would be captured. That's

why he shot at the driver, so he wouldn't be taken and drag me into it." She looked at Doc briefly, bitterly. "He wouldn't even let his friend, the Mexican, tell me he was hurt. The man did anyway."

"Money for seed," Doc murmured, anger touching his voice. He stood up, unaided, and walked slowly across the room. He noticed something now on the chair and he asked idly, his voice musing, as if he were not thinking of what he asked. "What's that canvas sack?"

"The money. All the money. It isn't touched." Suddenly, she started to cry, making no noise, only the tears rolled down her cheeks. Doc stood above her, helpless, slow fury making his lips tremble.

"They'll get their money back," Doc said slowly. "They'll get something else too. They'll get what I've been wanting to say for seven years."

She looked up at him, fear in her face. "But you can't take the money back now! Not after last night!"

"They think I'm in it already. They'll know it now."

"But why should you be punished?"

Doc smiled unpleasantly. "Let's see if I am," he murmured. He walked over to his desk and took out a six gun and rammed it in his hip pocket. He put on his coat and took up the canvas sack, and all the time she was watching him.

Paused in the doorway, he said, "I guess I need you beside me." He hesitated, at once shy and stubborn. "Afterward, I mean. Will you wait?"

SHE NODDED and saw him smile. He went down the steps, holding himself straight, breathing very gently against the fire that was in his ribs. The town was awake and on the street, but the people who stared at Doc didn't bother him. He went upstreet toward the bank, and saw Ferd Willis lounging in its open door. He came erect and put his thumbs in his belt as Doc approached

and stopped. Ferd's face was bland and wary, cocked for trouble.

"Changed your mind, Doc?" Ferd asked.

"Not any," Doc said quietly. "He's dead."

Willis looked at him levelly for a moment. "Who was he?"

"You'll never know, Willis. None of you."

"Maybe some more of what we gave you last night would change your mind."

"It might," Doc said gently, "if I got any more. I don't think I will."

He shouldered past Willis, walked the length of the long counter on the right and found Murdo McFie in his office at the rear. McFie rose from behind his desk, his impassive face as surprised as it ever would be. He was about to speak and then changed his mind, and watched Dr. Weber put the money sack on the desk.

"There's your money. All of it."

"Thank you," McFie said in his spare voice.

Dr. Weber stood there waiting for McFie to speak, but McFie was not going to.

"You want to know who stole it, don't you, McFie?"

"I did not say so."

"You said so last night."

McFie's glance dropped to the sack, then raised to Dr. Weber. "That was before the money was returned."

"But your friends want to know."

McFie shook his head slowly. "They were not my friends last night, Dr. Weber. I am a businessman entrusted with money. I tried to get back what rightfully belonged to me. But I would never beat up a man that way to get the name of a thief."

"From now on, no one else will," Dr. Weber said softly.

"I would not put my faith in that," McFie said gently.

"This is a rough country, Dr. Weber."

Dr. Weber smiled through thick lips. "I have learned that. For seven years I have whispered, McFie. Now I am going to shout."

McFie's face almost broke into a smile. "I think you could."

"I can," Dr. Weber said. "I am going to in about three minutes."

HE LEFT the office, shouldering past Ferd Willis at the door. Willis said, "Doc," but Dr. Weber did not pause in his stride. A small knot of people across the street watched him swing under the tie rail and cut slanting across the street and go into the express office.

Hod Strosnider was behind the bare counter of the express office calculating something on a piece of wrapping paper. He looked up into Doc's gun.

"Come out from behind there," Doc said. "I'm about to answer your question."

"About the stage robber?" Hod asked suspiciously.

"Any question you ask," Doc murmured. "The answer will be that it's none of your business. Now come out."

Hod came out, his face sullen and scared, trying to get a clue to Doc's real temper from his one good eye. When he was facing Doc, Doc swung the gun barrel in a rising arc that caught Strosnider on the temple, knocking him down.

"That's how it feels," Doc said. He threw the gun through the open door and came over to stand above Hod.

"Get up!"

Hod scrambled up and Doc hit him with his fist. Hod crashed into the paned window, and then the sill caught him behind the knees and he went on through as the window collapsed in a bell-clear jangle of glass.

Outside, Doc saw him lying there on the boardwalk, his arms a little outstretched, palms up, his feet still in-

side the window. Doc walked over to the gun, picked it up, and swung to face Ferd Willis across the street.

"Did you have something to say to me, Willis?" Doc called.

Willis was utterly motionless for several seconds. Then he said quietly, "I don't reckon, Doc."

"Maybe you have," Doc said. "I think you and all the other big outfits are pirates, Ferd. I think you're dirty. I don't think you'll stand up to a shoot-out alone, Ferd. If you will, try it now."

Ferd Willis didn't move. Doc gave him ten seconds, and then he turned and walked back to his office and the girl.

When Murdo McFie went home for supper that night, he went straight to the kitchen of the big white house that was his home. He kissed his wife, who turned away from the stove to talk to him while he washed his hands at the sink. While he was soaping his hands, he said, "Agnes, do you think you're an important woman in this town?"

His wife was cautious. She could not see his face, and that meant he was hiding it. She smiled, "I'm the banker's wife."

"How do you feel?"

"I never felt better in my life. Why?"

"Could you develop a pain on a day's notice?"

Her friendly eyes narrowed. "What kind of a rowdy trick are you and Charlie Coulter going to play on Dr. Caslin?"

"It's not Dr. Caslin," McFie said, "and it's not a trick. We're changing doctors."



*The posse—or the buzzards?*

## WINE ON THE DESERT

MAX BRAND

THERE WAS no hurry, except for thirst, like clotted salt, in the back of his throat, and Durante rode on slowly, rather enjoying the last moment of dryness before he reached the cold water in Tony's house. There was really no hurry at all. He had almost 24 hours' head start, for they would not find his dead man until this morning. After that there would be perhaps several hours of delay before the Sheriff gathered a sufficient posse and started on his trail. Or perhaps the sheriff would be fool enough to come alone.

Durante had been able to see the wheel and fan of Tony's windmill for more than an hour, but he could not make out the ten acres of the vineyard until he had topped the last rise, for the vines had been planted in a hollow. The lowness of the ground, Tony used to say, accounted for the water that gathered in the well during the wet season. The rains sank through the desert sand, through the gravels beneath, and gathered in a bowl of clay hardpan far below. In the middle of the rainless season the well ran dry but, long before that, Tony had every drop of the water pumped up into a score of tanks made of cheap corrugated iron. Slender pipe lines carried the water from the tanks to the vines and from time to time let them sip enough life to keep them until the winter darkened overhead and suddenly, one November day, and the rain came down, and all the earth made a

great hushing sound as it drank. Durante had heard that whisper of drinking when he was here before; but he never had seen the place in the middle of the long drought.

The windmill looked like a sacred emblem to Durante, and the 20 stodgy, tar-painted tanks blessed his eyes; but a heavy sweat broke out at once from his body. For the air of the hollow, unstirred by the wind, was hot and still as a bowl of soup. A reddish soup. The vines were powdered with thin red dust, also. They were wretched, dying things to look at, for the grapes had been gathered, the new wine had been made, and now the leaves hung in ragged tatters.

Durante rode up to the squat adobe house and right through the entrance into the patio. A flowering vine clothed three sides of the little court. Durante did not know the name of the plant, but it had large white blossoms with golden hearts that poured sweetness on the air. Durante hated the sweetness. It made him more thirsty.

He threw the reins of his mule and strode into the house. The water cooler stood in the hall outside the kitchen. There were two jars made of a porous stone, very ancient things, and the liquid which distilled through the pores kept the contents cool. The jar on the left held water; that on the right contained wine. There was a big tin dipper hanging on a peg beside each jar. Durante tossed off the cover of the vase on the left and plunged it in until the delicious coolness closed well above his wrist.

"Hey, Tony," he called. Out of his dusty throat the cry was a mere groaning. He drank and called again, clearly, "Tony!"

A voice pealed from off in the distance.

Durante, pouring down the second dipper of water, smelled the alkali dust which had shaken off his clothes. It seemed to him that heat was radiating like light from

his clothes, from his body, and the cool dimness of the house was soaking it up. He heard the wooden leg of Tony bumping on the ground, and Durante grinned; then Tony came in with that hitch and side-swing with which he accommodated the stiffness of his artificial leg. His brown face shone with sweat as though a special ray of light were focused on it.

"Ah, Dick!" he said. "Good old Dick! How long since you came last! Wouldn't Julia be glad! Wouldn't she be glad!"

"Ain't she here?" asked Durante, jerking his head suddenly away from the dripping dipper.

"She's away at Nogalez," said Tony. "It gets so hot. I said, 'You go up to Nogalez, Julia, where the wind don't forget to blow.' She cried, but I made her go."

"Did she cry?" asked Durante.

"Julia—that's a good girl," said Tony.

"Yeah. You bet she's good," said Durante. He put the dipper quickly to his lips but did not swallow for a moment; he was grinning too widely. Afterward he said, "You wouldn't throw some water into that mule of mine, would you, Tony?"

Tony went out with his wooden leg clumping loud on the wooden floor, softly in the patio dust. Durante found the hammock in the corner of the patio. He lay down in it and watched the color of sunset flush the mists of desert dust that rose to the zenith. The water was soaking through his body; hunger began, and then the rattling of pans in the kitchen and the cheerful cry of Tony's voice:

"What you want, Dick? I got some pork. You don't want pork. I'll make you some good Mexican beans. Hot. Ah ha, I know that old Dick. I have plenty of good wine for you, Dick. Tortillas. Even Julia can't make tortillas like me—and what about a nice young rabbit?"

"All blowed full of buckshot?" growled Durante.

"No, no, I kill them with the rifle."

"You kill rabbits with a rifle?" repeated Durante, with a quick interest.

"It's the only gun I have," said Tony. "If I catch them in the sights, they are dead. A wooden leg cannot walk very far—I must kill them quick. You see? They come close to the house about sunrise and flop their ears. I shoot through the head."

"Yeah? Yeah?" muttered Durante. "Through the head?" He relaxed, scowling. He passed his hand over his face, over his head.

Then Tony began to bring the food out into the patio and lay it on a small wooden table; a lantern hanging against the wall of the house included the table in a dim half circle of light. They sat there and ate. Tony had scrubbed himself for the meal. His hair was soaked in water and sleeked back over his round skull. A man in the desert might be willing to pay five dollars for as much water as went to the soaking of that hair.

Everything was good. Tony knew how to cook, and he knew how to keep the glasses filled with his wine.

"This is old wine. This is my father's wine. Eleven years old," said Tony. "You look at the light through it. You see that brown in the red? That's the soft that time puts in good wine, my father always said."

"What killed your father?"

Tony lifted his hand as though he were listening or as though he were pointing out a thought. "The desert killed. I found his mule. It was dead, too. There was a leak in the canteen. My father was only five miles away when the buzzards showed him to me."

"Five miles? Just an hour—good Lord!" said Durante. He stared with big eyes. "Just dropped down and died?" he asked.

"No," said Tony. "When you die of thirst, you always die just one way. First you tear off your shirt, then your

undershirt. That's to be cooler. And the sun comes and cooks your bare skin. And then you think—there is water everywhere, if you dig down far enough. You begin to dig. The dust comes up your nose. You start screaming. You break your nails in the sand. You wear the flesh off the tips of your fingers, to the bone." He took a quick swallow of wine.

"Without you seen a man die of thirst, how'd you know they start to screaming?" asked Durante.

"They got a screaming look when you find them," said Tony. "Take some more wine. The desert never can get to you here. My father showed me the way to keep the desert away from the hollow. We live pretty good here. No?"

"Yeah," said Durante loosening his shirt collar. "Yeah, pretty good." Afterward he slept well in the hammock until the report of a rifle waked him and he saw the color of dawn in the sky. It was such a great, round bowl that for a moment he felt as though he were above, looking down into it.

He got up and saw Tony coming in holding a rabbit by the ears, the rifle in his other hand. "You see?" said Tony. "Breakfast came and called on us!" He laughed.

Durante examined the rabbit with care. It was nice and fat and it had been shot through the head. Through the middle of the head. Such a shudder went down the back of Durante that he washed gingerly before breakfast; he felt that his blood was cooled for the entire day.

It was a good breakfast, too, with flapjacks and stewed rabbit with green peppers, and a quart of strong coffee. Before they had finished, the sun struck through the east window and started them sweating. "Gimme a look at that rifle of yours, Tony, will you?" Durante asked.

"You take a look at my rifle, but don't you steal the luck that's in it," laughed Tony. He brought the 15-shot Winchester.

"Loaded right to the brim?" asked Durante.

"I always load it full the minute I get back home," said Tony.

"Tony, come outside with me," commanded Durante.

They went out from the house. The sun turned the sweat of Durante to hot water and then dried his skin so that his clothes felt transparent. "Tony, I gotta be damn mean," said Durante. "Stand right there where I can see you. Don't try to get close. Now listen—the sheriff's gunna be along this trail some time today, looking for me. He'll load up himself and all his gang with water out of your tanks. Then he'll follow my sign across the desert. Get me? He'll follow if he finds water on the place. But he's not gunna find water."

"What you done, poor Dick?" said Tony. "Now look—I could hide you in the old wine cellar where nobody—"

"The sheriff's not gunna find any water," said Durante. "It's gunna be like this."

He put the rifle to his shoulder, aimed, fired. The shot struck the base of the nearest tank, ranging down through the bottom. A semicircle of darkness began to stain the soil near the edge of the iron wall.

Tony fell on his knees. "No, no, Dick! Good Dick!" he said. "Look! see the vineyard. It will die. It will turn into old, dead wood. Dick—"

"Shut your face," said Durante. "Now I've started, I kinda like the job."

Tony fell on his face and put his hands over his ears. Durante drilled a bullet hole through the tanks, one after another. Afterward, he leaned on the rifle.

"Take my canteen and go in and fill it with water out of the cooling jar," he said. "Snap into it, Tony!"

Tony got up. He raised the canteen, and looked around him, not at the tanks from which the water was pouring so that the noise of the earth drinking was audible, but at the rows of his vineyard. Then he went into the house.

Durante mounted his mule. He shifted the rifle to his left hand and drew out the heavy Colt from its holster. Tony came dragging back to him, his head down. Durante watched Tony with a careful revolver but he gave up the canteen without lifting his eyes.

"The trouble with you, Tony," said Durante, "is you're yellow. I'd of fought a tribe of wildcats with my bare hands, before I'd let 'em do what I'm doing to you. But you sit back and take it."

Tony did not seem to hear. He stretched out his hands to the vines. "Ah, my God," said Tony. "Will you let them all die?"

Durante shrugged his shoulders. He shook the canteen to make sure that it was full. It was so brimming that there was hardly room for the liquid to make a sloshing sound. Then he turned the mule and kicked it into a dog-trot. Half a mile from the house of Tony, he threw the empty rifle to the ground. There was no sense packing that useless weight, and Tony with his peg leg would hardly come this far.

Durante looked back, a mile or so later, and saw the little image of Tony picking up the rifle from the dust, then staring earnestly after his guest. Durante remembered the neat little hole clipped through the head of the rabbit. Wherever he went, his trail never could return again to the vineyard in the desert. But then, commencing to picture to himself the arrival of the sweating sheriff and his posse at the house of Tony, Durante laughed heartily.

The sheriff's posse could get plenty of wine, of course, but without water a man could not hope to make the desert voyage, even with a mule or horse to help him on the way. Durante patted the full, rounding side of his canteen. He might even now begin with the first sip but it was a luxury to postpone pleasure until desire became greater.

He raised his eyes along the trail. Close by, it was merely dotted with occasional bones, but distance joined the dots into an unbroken chalk line which wavered with a strange leisure across the Apache Desert, pointing toward the cool blue promise of the mountains. The next morning he would be among them.

A coyote whisked out of a gully and ran like a gray puff of dust on the wind. His tongue hung out like a little red rag from the side of his mouth; and suddenly Durante was dry to the marrow. He uncorked and lifted his canteen. It had a slightly sour smell; perhaps the sacking which covered it had grown a trifle old. And then he poured a great mouthful of lukewarm liquid. He had swallowed it before his senses could give him warning.

It was wine!

He looked first of all toward the mountains. They were as calmly blue, as distant as when he had started that morning. Twenty-four hours not on water, but on wine!

"I deserve it," said Durant. "I trusted him to fill the canteen—I deserve it. Curse him!" With a mighty resolution, he quieted the panic in his soul. He would not touch the stuff until noon. Then he would take one discreet sip. He would win through.

Hours went by. He looked at his watch and found it was only ten o'clock. And he had thought that it was on the verge of noon! He uncorked the wine and drank freely and, corking the canteen, felt almost as though he needed a drink of water more than before. He sloshed the contents of the canteen. Already it was horribly light.

Once he turned the mule and considered the return trip; but he could remember the head of the rabbit too clearly, drilled right through the center. The vineyard, the rows of old, twisted, gnarled little trunks with the bark peeling off—every vine was to Tony like a human life. And Durante had condemned them all to death!

He faced the blue of the mountains again. His heart



raced in his breast with terror. Perhaps it was fear and not the suction of that dry and deadly air that made his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth.

The day grew old. Nausea began to work in his stomach, nausea alternating with sharp pains. When he looked down, he saw that there was blood on his boots. He had been spurring the mule until the red ran down from its flanks. It went with a curious stagger, like a rocking horse with a broken rocker, and Durante grew aware that he had been keeping the mule at a gallop for a long time. He pulled it to a halt. It stood with wide-braced legs. Its head was down. When he leaned from the saddle, he saw that its mouth was open.

"It's gunna die," said Durante. "It's gunna die—what a fool I been—"

The mule did not die until after sunset. Durante left everything except his revolver. He packed the weight of that for an hour and discarded it, in turn. His knees were growing weak. When he looked up at the stars they shone white and clear for a moment only, and then whirled into little racing circles and scrawls of red.

He lay down. He kept his eyes closed and waited for the shaking to go out of his body, but it would not stop. And every breath of darkness was like an inhalation of black dust. He got up and went on, staggering. Sometimes he found himself running.

Before you die of thirst, you go mad. He kept remembering that. His tongue had swollen big. Before it choked him, if he lanced it with his knife the blood would help him; he would be able to swallow. Then he remembered that the taste of blood is salty.

Once, in his boyhood, he had ridden through a pass with his father and they had looked down on the sapphire of a mountain lake, a hundred thousand million tons of water as cold as snow. . . .

When he looked up, now, there were no stars, and this

frightened him terribly. He never had seen a desert night so dark. His eyes were failing, he was being blinded. When the morning came, he would not be able to see the mountains, and he would walk around and around in a circle until he dropped and died.

No stars, no wind; the air was still as the waters of a stale pool, and he in the dregs at the bottom. . . .

He seized his shirt at the throat and tore it away so that it hung in two rags from his hips.

He could see the earth only well enough to stumble on the rocks. But there were no stars in the heavens. He was blind; he had no more hope than a rat in a well. Ah, but Italian devils know how to put poison in wine that will steal all the senses or any one of them; and Tony had chosen to blind Durante.

He heard a sound like water. It was the swishing of the soft, deep sand through which he was treading, sand so soft that a man could dig it away with his bare hands. . . .

Afterward, after many hours, out of the blind face of that sky the rain began to fall. It made first a whispering and then a delicate murmur like voices conversing, but after that, just at the dawn, it roared like the hoofs of ten thousand charging horses. Even through that thundering confusion the big birds with naked heads and red, raw necks found their way down to one place in the Apache Desert.

*They grew too big for their britches*

## THE HONK-HONK BREED

STEWART EDWARD WHITE

IT WAS Sunday at the ranch. For a wonder the weather had been favorable; the windmills were all working, the bogs had dried up, the beef had lasted over, the remuda had not strayed—in short, there was nothing to do. Sang had given us a baked bread-pudding with raisins in it. We filled it in—a wash basin full of it—on top of a few incidental pounds of *chile con*, baked beans, soda biscuits, "air tights," and other delicacies. Then we adjourned with our pipes to the shady side of the blacksmith's shop where we could watch the ravens on top the adobe wall of the corral. Somebody told a story about ravens. This led to road-runners. This suggested rattlesnakes. They started Windy Bill.

"Speakin' of snakes," said Windy, "I mind when they caught the great-granddaddy of all the bullsnakes up at Lead in the Black Hills. I was only a kid then. This wasn't no such tur'ble long a snake, but he was more'n a foot thick. Looked just like a sahuaro stalk. Man name of Terwilliger Smith caught it. He named this yere bull-snake Clarence, and got it so plumb gentle it followed him everywhere. One day old P. T. Barnum come along and wanted to buy this Clarence snake—offered Terwilliger a thousand cold—but Smith wouldn't part with the snake nohow. So finally they fixed up a deal so Smith could go along with the show. They shoved Clarence in a box in the baggage car, but after a while Mr. Snake gets

so lonesome he gnaws out and starts to crawl back to find his master. Just as he is half-way between the baggage car and the smoker, the couplin' give way—right on that heavy grade between Custer and Rocky Point. Well, sir, Clarence wound his head 'round one brake wheel and his tail around the other, and held that train together to the bottom of the grade. But it stretched him twenty-eight feet and they had to advertise him as a boa-constrictor."

Windy Bill's history of the faithful bullsnake aroused to reminiscence the grizzled stranger, who thereupon held forth as follows:

Wall, I've see things and I've heerd things, some of them ornery, and some you'd love to believe, they was that gorgeous and improbable. Nat'ral history was always my hobby and sportin' events my special pleasure—and this yarn of Windy's reminds me of the only chanst I ever had to ring in business and pleasure and hobby all in one grand merry-go-round of joy. It come about like this:

One day, a few year back, I was sittin' on the beach at Santa Barbara watchin' the sky stay up, and wonderin' what to do with my year's wages, when a little squinch-eye round-face with big bow spectacles came and plumped down beside me.

"Did you ever stop to think," says, he, shovin' back his hat, "that if the horse-power delivered by them waves on this beach in one single hour could be concentrated behind washin' machines, it would be enough to wash all the shirts for a city of four hundred and fifty-one thousand one hundred and thirty-six people?"

"Can't say I ever did," says I, squintin' at him sideways.

"Fact," says he, "and did it ever occur to you that if all the food a man eats in the course of a natural life could be gathered together at one time, it would fill a wagon-train twelve miles long?"

"You make me hungry," says I.

"And ain't it interestin' to reflect," he goes on, "that if all the finger-nail parin's of the human race for one year was to be collected and subjected to hydraulic pressure it would equal in size the pyramid of Cheops?"

"Look yere," says I, sittin' up, "did you ever pause to excogitate that if all the hot air you is dispensin' was to be collected together it would fill a balloon big enough to waft you and me over that Bullyvard of Palms to yonder gin mill on the corner?"

He didn't say nothin' to that, just yanked me to my feet, faced me towards the gin mill above mentioned, and exerted considerable pressure on my arm in urgin' of me forward.

"You ain't so much of a dreamer, after all," thinks I. "In important matters you are plumb decisive."

We sat down at little tables, and my friend ordered a beer and a chicken sandwich.

"Chickens," says he, gazin' at the sandwich, "is a dollar apiece in this country, and plumb scarce. Did you ever pause to ponder over the returns chickens would give on a small investment? Say you start with ten hens. Each hatches out thirteen aigs, of which allow a loss of say six for childish accidents. At the end of the year you has eighty chickens. At the end of two years that flock has increased to six hundred and twenty. At the end of the third year——"

He had the medicine tongue! Ten days later him and me was occupyin' of an old ranch fifty mile from anywhere. When they run stage-coaches this joint used to be a road-house. The outlook was on about a thousand little brown foothills. A road two miles, four rods, two foot eleven inches in sight run by in front of us. It come over one foothill and disappeared over another. I know just how long it was, for later in the game I measured it.

Out back was about a hundred little wire chicken cor-

rals filled with chickens. We had two kinds. That was the doin's of Tuscarora. My pardner called himself Tuscarora Maxillary. I asked him once if that was his real name.

"It's the realest little old name you ever heerd tell of," says he. "I know, for I made it myself—liked the sound of her. Parents ain't got no rights to name their children. Parents don't have to be called them names."

Well, these chickens, as I said, was of two kinds. The first was these low-set, heavy-weight propositions with feathers on their laigs, and not much laigs at that, called Cochin Chiny. The other was a tall ridiculous outfit made up entire of bulgin' breast and gangle laigs. They stood about two foot and a half tall, and when they went to peck the ground their tail feathers stuck straight up to the sky. Tusky called 'em Japanese Games.

"Which the chief advantage of them chickens is," says he, "that in weight about ninety percent of 'em is breast meat. Now my idee is, that if we can cross 'em with these Cochin Chiny fowls we'll have a low-hung, heavy-weight chicken runnin' strong on breast meat. These Jap Games is too small, but if we can bring 'em up in size and shorten their laigs, we'll shore have a winner."

That looked good to me, so we started in on that idee. The theery was bully, but she didn't work out. The first broods we hatched growed up with big husky Cochin Chiny bodies and little short necks, perched up on laigs three foot long. Them chickens couldn't reach ground no-how. We had to build a table for 'em to eat off, and when they went out rustlin' for themselves they had to confine themselves to sidehills or flyin' insects. Their breasts was all right, though—"And think of them drumsticks for the boardin'-house trade!" says Tusky.

So far things wasn't so bad. We had a good grubstake. Tusky and me used to feed them chickens twict a day, and then used to set around watchin' the playful crit-

ters chase grasshoppers up an' down the wire corrals, while Tusky figgered out what'd happen if somebody was dumfool enough to gather up somethin' and fix it in baskets or wagons or such. That was where we showed our ignorance of chickens.

One day in the spring I hitched up, rustled a dozen of the youngsters into coops, and druv over to the railroad to make our first sale. I couldn't fold them chickens up into them coops at first, but then I stuck the coops up on aidge and they worked all right, though I will admit they was a comical sight. At the railroad one of them towerist trains had just slowed down to a halt as I come up, and the towerists was paradin' up and down allowin' they was particular enjoyin' of the warm Californy sunshine. One old terrapin, with grey chin whiskers, projected over, with his wife, and took a peek through the slats of my coop. He straightened up like someone had touched him off with a red-hot poker.

"Stranger," said he, in a scared kind of whisper, "whats them?"

"Them's chickens," says I.

He took another long look.

"Marthy," says he to the old woman, "this will be about all! We come out from Ioway to see the Wonders of Californy, but I can't go nothin' stronger than this. If these is chickens, I don't want to see no Big Trees."

Well, I sold them chickens all right for a dollar and two bits, which was better than I expected, and got an order for more. About ten days later I got a letter from the commission house.

"We are returnin' a sample of your Arts and Crafts chickens with the lovin' marks of the teeth still onto him," says they. "Don't send any more till they stops pursuin' of the nimble grasshopper. Dentist bill will foller."

With the letter came the remains of one of the chickens. Tusky and I, very indignant, cooked her for supper.

She was tough, all right. We thought she might do better biled, so we put her in the pot over night. Nary bit. Well, then we got interested. Tusky kep' the fire goin' and I rustled greasewood. We cooked her three days and three nights. At the end of that time she was sort of pale and frazzled, but still givin' points to three-year-old jerky on cohesion and other uncompromisin' forces of Nature. We buried her then, and went out back to recuperate.

There we could gaze on the smilin' landscape, dotted by about four hundred long-laigged chickens swoopin' here and there after grasshoppers.

"We got to stop that," says I.

"We can't," murmured Tusky, inspired. "We can't. It's born in 'em; it's a primal instinct, like the love of a mother for her young, and it can't be eradicated! Them chickens is constructed by a divine providence for the express purpose of chasin' grasshoppers, jest as the beaver is made for buildin' dams, and the cow-puncher is made for whisky and faro-games. We can't keep 'em from it. If we was to shut 'em in a dark cellar, they'd flop after imaginary grasshoppers in their dreams, and die emaciated in the midst of plenty. Jimmy, we're up agin the Cosmos, the oversoul—" Oh, he had the medicine tongue, Tusky had, and risin' on the wings of eloquence that way, he had me faded in ten minutes. In fifteen I was wedded solid to the notion that the bottom had dropped out of the chicken business. I think now that if we'd shut them hens up, we might have—still, I don't know; they was a good deal in what Tusky said.

"Tuscarora Maxillary," says I, "did you ever stop to entertain that beautiful thought that if all the dumfoolishness possessed now by the human race could be gathered together, and lined up alongside of us, the first feller to come along would say to it 'Why, hello, Solomon!'"

We quit the notion of chickens for profit right then and there, but we couldn't quit the place. We hadn't



much money, for one thing, and then we kind of liked loafin' around and raisin' a little garden truck, and—oh, well, I might as well say so, we had a notion about placers in the dry wash back of the house—you know how it is. So we stayed on, and kept a-raisin' these long-laigs for the fun of it. I used to like to watch 'em projectin' around, and I fed 'em twict a day about as usual.

So Tusky and I lived alone there together, happy as ducks in Arizona. About onc't in a month somebody'd pike along the road. She wasn't much of a road, generally more chuck-holes than bumps, though sometimes it was the other way around. Unless it happened to be a man horseback or maybe a freighter without the fear of God in his soul, we didn't have no words with them; they was too busy cussin' the highways and generally too mad for social discourses.

One day early in the year, when the 'dobe mud made ruts to add to the bumps, one of these automobileels went past. It was the first Tusky and me had seen in them parts so we run out to view her. Owin' to the high spots on the road, she looked like one of these movin' picters, as to blur and wobble; sounded like a cyclone mingled with cuss-words, and smelt like hell on housecleanin' day.

"Which them folks don't seem to be enjoyin' of the scenery," says I to Tusky. "Do you reckon that there blue trail is smoke from the machine or remarks from the inhabitants thereof?"

Tusky raised his head and sniffed long and inquiren'.

"It's langwidge," says he. "Did you ever stop to think that all the words in the dictionary hitched end to end would reach——"

But at that minute I catched sight of somethin' brass lyin' in the road. It proved to be a curled-up sort of horn with a rubber bulb on the end. I squeeze the bulb and jumped twenty foot over the remark she made.

"Jarred off the machine," says Tusky.

"Oh, did it?" says I, my nerves still wrong. "I thought maybe it had growed up from the soil like a toadstool."

About this time we abolished the wire chicken corrals, because we needed some of the wire. Them long-laigs thereupon scattered all over the flat searchin' out their prey. When feed time come I had to screech my lungs out gettin' of 'em in, and then sometimes they didn't all hear. It was plumb discouragin', and I mighty nigh made up my mind to quit 'em, but they had come to be sort of pets, and I hated to turn 'em down. It used to tickle Tusky almost to death to see me out there hollerin' away like an old bull-frog. He used to come out reg'lar with his pipe lit, just to enjoy me. Finally I got mad and opened up on him.

"Oh," he explains, "it just plumb amuses me to see the dumfool at his childish work. Why don't you teach 'em to come to that brass horn, and save your voice?"

"Tusky," says I, with feelin', "sometimes you do seem to get a glimmer of real sense."

Well, first off them chickens used to throw backsommersets over that horn. You have no idee how slow chickens is to learn things. I could tell you things about chickens—say, this yere bluff about roosters bein' gallant is all wrong. I've watched 'em. When one finds a nice feed he gobbles it so fast that the pieces foller down his throat like yearlin's through a hole in the fence. It's only when he scratches up a measly one-grain quick-lunch that he calls up the hens and stands noble and self-sacrificin' to one side. That ain't the point, which is, that after two months I had them long-laigs so they'd drop everythin' and come kitin' at the *honk-honk* of that horn. It was a purty sight to see 'em, sailin' in from all directions twenty foot at a stride. I was proud of 'em, and named 'em the Honk-honk Breed. We didn't have no others, for by now the coyotes and bob-cats had nailed the straight-

breeds. There wasn't no wild cat or coyote could catch one of my Honk-honks, no, sir!

We made a little on our placer—just enough to keep interested. Then the supervisors decided to fix our road, and what's more, *they done it!* That's the only part in this yarn that's hard to believe, but, boys, you'll have to take it on faith. They ploughed her, and crowned her, and scraped her, and rolled her, and when they moved on we had the fanciest highway in the State of Californy.

That noon—the day they called her a job—Tusky and I sat smokin' our pipes as per usual, when way over the foothills we seen a cloud of dust and faint to our cars was bore a whizzin' sound. The chickens was gathered under the cottonwood for the heat of the day, but they didn't pay no attention. Then faint, but clear, we heard another of them brass horns:

"Honk! honk!" says it, and every one of them chickens woke up, and stood at attention.

"Honk! honk!" it hollered clearer and nearer. Then over the hill come an automobeel, blowin' vigorous at every jump.

"My God!" I yells to Tusky, kickin' over my chair, as I springs to my feet. "Stop 'em! Stop 'em!"

But it was too late. Out the gate sprinted them poor devoted chickens, and up the road they trailed in vain pursuit. The last we seen of 'em was a minglin' of dust and dim figgers goin' thirty mile an hour after a disappearin' automobeel.

That was all we seen for the moment. About three o'clock the first straggler came limpin' in, his wings hangin', his mouth open, his eyes glazed with the heat. By sundown fourteen had returned. All the rest had disappeared utter; we never seen 'em again. I reckon they just naturally run themselves into a sunstroke and died on the road.

It takes a long time to learn a chicken a thing, but a heap longer to unlearn him. After that two or three of these yere automobeels went by every day, all a-blowin' of their horns, all kickin' up a hell of a dust. And every time them fourteen Honk-honks of mine took along after 'em, just as I'd taught 'em to do, layin' to get to their corn when they caught up. No more of 'em died, but that fourteen did get into elegant trainin'. After a while they got plumb to enjoyin' it. When you come right down to it, a chicken don't have many amusements and relaxations in this life. Searchin' for worms, chasin' grasshoppers, and wallerin' in the dust is about the limits of joys for chickens.

It was sure a fine sight to see 'em after they got well into the game. About nine o'clock every mornin' they would saunter down to the rise of the road where they would wait patient until a machine came along. Then it would warm your heart to see the enthusiasm of them. With exultant cackles of joy they'd trail in, reachin' out like quarter-horses, their wings half spread out, their eyes beamin' with delight. At the lower turn they'd quit. Then, after talkin' it over excited-like for a few minutes, they'd calm down and wait for another.

After a few months of this sort of trainin' they got purty good at it. I had one two-year-old rooster that made fifty-four mile an hour behind one of those sixty-horse-power Panhandles. When cars didn't come along often enough, they'd all turn out and chase jack-rabbits. They wasn't much fun at that. After a short, brief sprint the rabbit would crouch down plumb terrified, while the Honk-honks pulled off triumphal dances around his shrinkin' form.

Our ranch got to be purty well known them days among automobeelists. The strength of their cars was horse-power, of course, but the speed of them they got to

ratin' by chicken-power. Some of them used to come way up from Los Angeles just to try out a new car along our road with the Honk-honks for pace-makers. We charged them a little somethin', and then, too, we opened up the road-house and the bar, so we did purty well. It wasn't necessary to work any longer at that bogus placer. Evenin's we sat around outside and swapped yarns, and I bragged on my chickens. The chickens would gather round close to listen. They liked to hear their praises sung, all right. You bet they *sabe!* The only reason a chicken, or any other critter, isn't intelligent is because he hasn't no chance to expand.

Why, we used to run races with 'em. Some of us would hold two or more chickens back of a chalk line, and the starter'd blow the horn from a hundred yards to a mile away, dependin' on whether it was a sprint or for distance. We had pools on the results, gave odds, made books, and kept records. After the thing got knowed we made money hand over fist.

The stranger broke off abruptly and began to roll a cigarette.

"What did you quit it for, then?" ventured Charley, out of the hushed silence.

"Pride," replied the stranger solemnly. "Haughtiness of spirit."

"How so?" urged Charley, after a pause.

"Them chickens," continued the stranger, after a moment, "stood around listenin' to me a-braggin' of what superior fowls they was until they got all puffed up. They wouldn't have nothin' whatever to do with the ordinary chickens we brought in for eatin' purposes, but stood around lookin' bored when there wasn't no sport doin'. They got to be just like that Four Hundred you read about in the papers. It was one continual round ol' grasshopper balls, race meets, and afternoon hen-parties.

They got idle and haughty, just like folks. Then come race suicide. They got to feelin' so aristocratic the hens wouldn't have no eggs."

Nobody dared say a word.

"Windy Bill's snake—" began the narrator genially.

"Stranger," broke in Windy Bill, with great emphasis, "as to that snake, I want you to understand this: yere-after in my estimation that snake is nothin' but an ornery angle-worm!"

*He watched him, dying of thirst*

## WATERHOLE

HAL G. EVARTS

THE INDIAN lay motionless on a blistering ledge that overlooked the *tinaja* seep hole known to his people as In-ho-h'ha, or Last Water, three hundred yards below. The water itself, what little remained in the scooped-out sandstone basin, was clogged and foul, black with bugs and rotting debris—but water. Joe Nehasu had not moistened his lips in the previous forty-two hours; because of that he was trapped. Trapped by his own thirst, caught between the August noonday sun and a .30-.30 rifle in the hands of a white named Charlie Baxter.

He spat the pebble from his mouth because he no longer had saliva to wet his parched throat. His tongue felt furry and swollen. The sun was a web of pressure on the back of his neck. Down at the seep the white man sat in the scanty shade of a mesquite, the rifle balanced across his knees; he swung his gaze back and forth over the flat, barren expanse of sand that shimmered like a

protective moat between him and the base of the nearest rocks. Behind Baxter a tethered burro was switching at flies. Joe Nehasu fixed his eyes on the canteen looped over the burro's pack saddle.

"Better give up, kid," Baxter shouted.

Joe pressed his belly against the rock. Baxter rose to his feet, peering up under the brim of his hat toward the heat-blurred ridge. His gaze shifted methodically, minutely along the sky line. Stepping into the mesquite clump, he lifted the canteen and tilted back his head. Joe watched him take a generous pull, sprinkle a few drops on his face with an elaborate flourish, and wipe the back of his hand across his mouth.

A dull nausea wrenched and shook Joe. He knew, unashamedly, that he would cry if there was left in him the moisture for tears. The heat haze hung thick and tawny, obscuring the mountain range to the north. From the reservation there he had marched deep into the badlands, almost to the border, traveling by night, resting by day, as the desert-wise coyote. So Joe Nehasu had come alone to Last Water at daybreak, proudly, to observe the ancient tribal custom. Without water, without weapons, without food—to fast and meditate in solitude and purify himself for manhood.

One scared Indian boy, not yet sixteen summers. . . .

The birds had been strangely silent in the thicket, a fact which Joe failed to notice because even then he was thirsty. He loped over the last rise and down the trail in the deceptive half-light of dawn, intent on the faint sweetish scent of growth that marked the water hole. He was in a hurry and careless, heeding nothing but his own need. So he missed the man and burro bedded behind a hummock. His eyes were only for the seep.

It was a shallow pocket, possibly six feet in circumference, fed by occasional rains and by some subterranean trickle. The ground around was littered with old cig-

arette packs, empty cans and animal droppings. In the rocks near by one might find bits of ollas and flint arrowheads. There had been a Last Water before the gold prospectors, before the Spanish Jesuits, before the first wandering Mojave hunters. Even in the driest summer it held at least a puddle.

Joe picked up the rusty lard paid that served as a dipper. Then footsteps crunched on the gravel behind him. "Get 'em up," the voice said. "Get 'em up and turn around—slow."

CHARLIE BAXTER was a tall, blunt-featured man in sweat-stained jeans. His beard stubble was yellow with dust, and his eyes were sun-glazed and bloodshot. Across the barrel of the rifle he looked angry and a little startled. "Why, it's only a kid. What you snoopin' around here for?"

Joe swallowed. Despite the changes he recognized Charlie Baxter. He would never forget the bitter, twisted expression of the man's face, the screamed abuse and threats—although Joe had been only ten at the time. In that split instant of identification he knew with sickening clarity the meaning of Baxter's presence, and a coil of terror constricted his throat.

"Come on," Baxter said. "Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me." Joe met his level, searching look. Stammering over the English words, he said, "I came alone—to pray."

Baxter blinked. "Brave medicine, huh?" He knew Indians and their ways. "Pass anybody on the trail?"

Joe shook his head. Indians as well as whites avoided the badlands in August; only scorpions and sidewinders lived there, the legend went. Baxter knew that also. Guardedly Joe glanced at the camp. Baxter, he supposed, had arrived some time during early morning, planning to lay over until dark. A canteen and a pistol lay within



reach of a spread-out blanket. The other gear had been covered with a square of dirty tarp. Through a rip in the canvas Joe saw the glint of a five-gallon fuel can, the square-cornered kind often used on ranches. There were six or eight, he couldn't be sure which.

"How the holes between here and the mountains?"

"All dry." Joe's voice was a whisper. The dry trail had been part of the self-imposed ordeal, a trial of endurance for he had known there would be water at the end. But now his thirst was real. "No water next thirty-eight miles."

Baxter grunted and uncurled his finger from the trigger guard. He seemed satisfied. And then, in his relief, Joe made a mistake. "Any water below the border?"

The white man's eyes narrowed. "Who says I come across the Line? What reservation you from?"

"Cuyiape."

"That's what I figured. What's your name, boy?"

Joe's breath caught. "Ko-la-ni-tok."

"Don't gimme that. Not your lodge name, your agency name. The one you learned to write in school."

Joe bit his lip. Baxter jabbed the muzzle at him. "Don't fool with me, boy. I seen you somewhere before. What is it?"

"My name"—Joe straightened his shoulders. "My name," he whispered, "is—Joe. Joe Nehasu."

"Nehasu! That's it! You're old Chief Nehasu's boy." Baxter's face wrinkled in a grin. "Well, that makes things different."

The scene flashed through Joe's mind in vivid detail. His father grim and stern, standing guard in the moonlight with a shotgun. Charlie Baxter, blustering mad, surprised on reservation land with a burroload of smuggled mescal. And Joe, a solemn, wide-eyed boy, fearful of both the white man and of his father's stubborn anger. "When we drink whisky," Tom Nehasu had said that

night, "we'll drink it as free and honest men. We'll not break the law by trade with trouble-makers like you. Until the law is changed we'll do without. Joe—go call the marshal."

It was quite a speech for his father.

Charlie Baxter had sworn and pleaded, offered money. In the end he promised to return and shoot the chief on sight. Tom Nchasu had listened impassively, the shotgun cradled in his arm. After the trial in federal court he never mentioned the incident again.

"Small world, ain't it, Joe?" Baxter said. He spread his feet comfortably. "Who'd ever thought we'd meet again like this, jest the two of us, you an' me, way out here miles from nowhere. Been a long time."

Joe studied the ground, the fear a crazy, jumping pulse inside of him.

"Not worried are you, Joe? You don't think I still hold a grudge. Not me, kid. I'm a forgivin' nature. I had two years to forgive. Two years and thirty days off for good behavior. An' here you are, so growed up I hardly know you. Your old man must be mighty proud of his boy." Baxter spat in the sand. "Why don't you say something, Joe?"

"What do you want?" Joe said thickly.

"What do I want? I want to be friends, what else?" Baxter glanced at the tarp and chuckled. "But you must be thirsty. No canteen and forty miles without water. You're a chip off the old block, Joe. I'll pour you a drink."

A step at a time he backed away, his rifle trained on Joe. He fished a tin cup from his pack and stooped to fill it with a foamy colorless liquid from one of the cans. He set the cup on a rock. "There you are. Step up, boy. Better than that stinking water."

Joe walked forward slowly and lifted the cup in both hands. It sloshed over, and he winced at the whiff of raw,

undiluted spirits. He looked across the rim at Baxter who was waiting with a tight queer smile. "Go on. Bottoms up." Baxter spat again. "Drink, damn you!"

Joe closed his eyes and gulped. The mescal poured between his teeth and down his throat, burning, stinging all the way. He gagged, choked down the rest and shuddered, swaying on his feet. His stomach muscles cramped as he fought to hold it. He opened his eyes and somehow forced a grin.

Baxter eyed him without expression. "You like that firewater?"

His voice was muffled and indistinct. Joe focused on the white man's face. The blood was humming in his ears and the sand seemed to buckle under him. "Okay, Joe," Baxter said. "When you get home you didn't see me, understand. You had your powwow with the spirits, that's all. You don't know anything about me. I'm gonna make sure you get that straight."

Joe said nothing.

"Now you're bein' smart. Keep your mouth shut." Baxter kicked the lard pail at him. "Drop that cup. Then ease over to the seep and dip yourself a chaser. While you do that I'll set up the next round."

The cup slipped from Joe's fingers. He sank to his knees and crawled to the edge of the tank. He shook his head, half-conscious of movement behind him, and scraped away a patch of scum from the water. Cooling freshness touched his face and his throat worked involuntarily. His impulse was to plunge in his head and drink, drink, fill his belly, but a sudden doubt restrained him. Water was too precious; the seep held only a bucketful or two.

A LEAF fluttered down, riffling the surface. Baxter's distorted image was mirrored there, towering above him, the rifle clubbed across one shoulder. For an incredulous mo-

ment Joe stared at the reflection, paralyzed, unable to move. Then he was twisting sideways, rolling over, dodging the downward smash. The stock grazed his elbow and he staggered to his feet and ran. He ran blindly, his head lowered and his legs pumping, through the fringe of mesquite and across the sand.

Baxter shouted. Joe was dimly aware of the rifle's crack, of a whining past his ear. Baxter was ordering him to stop. The slope of the ridge rushed at him, and the rifle crashed again. Dust puffed up to his right and he swerved left, instinctively, without reason. As Baxter fired again he tripped. He fell hard on his face and Baxter ceased firing and lumbered after him. Joe pushed himself up and raced on to the cover of the rocks before Baxter could shoulder his gun and aim again.

He stumbled into a draw and scrambled along its narrow, winding bed. A ricochet whined above his head. Then it grew quiet. He ran on a while and halted and peered back around a boulder. Baxter had stopped to reload. He stood at the mouth of the draw, scowling up at the ridge. From that distance Joe could see his flushed face and heaving chest and shoulders. The white man seemed to reach a decision. After one final glance he shrugged and tramped back to the water hole.

Suspecting some trick, Joe waited a minute longer. He could hide indefinitely in the jumble of rocks. Or he could run. He was younger than Baxter, lighter, faster, wearing moccasins instead of boots. But run where? Farther into the badlands, or across into Mexico? He had never been beyond the *tinaja*. Only a fool ran from water; only one ignorant of the desert. And Baxter knew this desert well.

He climbed around the flank of the ridge and dropped into an arroyo and ran on in a kind of hysteria. The heat shine was sultry and intense and his head throbbed with every jolting footfall. His breathing became an agonized

gasp. The ground whirled and swam up to meet him. He threw himself under a creosote bush and retched until he lost consciousness.

THE SUN was beating down on his upturned face. He groaned and propped himself up on one elbow. His throat was rasped and cottony. He broke off a twig and sucked out its astringent flavor to neutralize the awful metallic taste that clung to the roof of his mouth. The morning was still, breathless, and unbelievably hot. He stood up unsteadily and a lizard scurried away. He stumbled over to the bank and fell into its band of shade.

Water. He could do without food, or sleep, but not without water. He recalled tales of certain *Baja* Indians who extracted moisture from barrel cactus and desert lilies, drank the blood of snakes. It sounded simple, but he was a reservation Indian who lived in a house and drove his father's truck; he drank his water from a faucet.

He speculated about the white man. Baxter had slipped past the border patrol at night. He would be in a hurry to sell his load, but he could not leave now because of Joe. Joe would report him. Therefore he would wait until Joe got thirsty enough. Nor could Joe make the long, dry march back to the reservation. His father did not expect him for several days; his father expected him to carry out his purpose. No one else would walk this trail. There were only himself and Charlie Baxter.

Retracing his tracks, Joe returned to the ridge. He picked his way up the reverse side through a maze of boulders and crept to the crest. Identical ridges, sere and bleached of color, receded into a blur of heat waves across the horizon. The lifeless air felt coarse and gritty to his skin. He eased forward and raised his head. Baxter was sitting by the seep, fanning himself with his hat, the rifle slanted across his lap.

Systematically Joe inspected the ground around the

camp, seeking some slight depression or possible approach. From above, it appeared everywhere flat and exposed. From time to time Baxter squinted up at the sky. This puzzled Joe until he noticed a black speck far above in the haze. He frowned and turned his attention back to the white man. Presently Baxter stretched and leaned his gun against the pack saddle. He walked a few paces out into the sand and cupped his hands.

"Don't be a sucker, kid. I know you're up there somewhere. You can't fool buzzards."

Joe craned his neck. Minutes ago there had been one, drawn by curiosity. Now three turkey buzzards glided and dipped above him in lazy swoops. Baxter stepped nearer and held up both hands. "You win, Joe," he yelled. "I can't hang around forever. My rifle's back yonder. Come on down and we'll make a deal."

He stood listening, his head cocked to one side. Then he climbed up among the rocks, moving carefully and pausing every few feet to check the water hole with a backward glance. Joe watched his progress uneasily. "I got a proposition," Baxter called. "You keep your mouth shut and we'll split. Fifty dollars for you." He mopped his face with a bandanna. "How about it, Joe?"

Joe could hear his panting, see the darkening sweat stain across his shirt. He looked irritable and drawn. For the first time it occurred to Joe that he might outmatch the white man's patience. Baxter came on slowly in silence. Seventy-five yards, sixty—fifty. Joe calculated the distance-between himself and the seep. He told himself it was too easy, too obvious, that Baxter must be baiting another trap.

But when Baxter halted again, he decided to risk his speed. He was on his feet and running. Baxter whirled, drew the pistol from his hip pocket and fired. Surprised completely, Joe flung himself down and squirmed behind a rock. He had forgotten the pistol. Baxter was still be-

tween him and water. Another bullet spanged harmlessly yards away. For a man accustomed to guns he seemed to Joe an astonishingly bad shot at close range.

Joe squatted on his heels, straining for some further sound as the dead hush closed in once more. Edging forward finally, he saw that Baxter had withdrawn. Baxter was plodding back to his camp.

The bitter realization grew on him. Baxter was playing with him, hide-and-seek among the rocks, wearing him down. Every exertion he made shortened the white man's wait. It was a game of prisoner's base in which he, the runner on the perimeter, was captive. As long as Baxter held the center of the circle, Joe could only lose.

Gradually the passage of time lost significance. The sun wheeled in a slow, murderous arc. He lay face down, ignoring Baxter and his movements. His breathing was labored, irregular, suffocating. A feverish pattern of pictures formed and dissolved in his mind—his father's cornfield in the mountains, manzanita trees and shady live oaks, a sweet, gushing spring. He ran his tongue back and forth over his cracked lips.

HOURS LATER a faraway drone roused him. The haze had lifted partially, and to the south silver wing tips flashed briefly in the afternoon sun. He wondered idly if it could be an Immigration Service patrol plane. It made no difference, but he saw Baxter following its flight. The thrum of the motor failed. The white man turned away and poured himself a cupful of mescal from one of the cans. He drank sparingly in sips and filled his canteen from the seep. Next he kindled a small fire, and the aroma of frying bacon drifted up the ridge. After he had eaten he stamped out the embers and watered the burro. He shook out his blanket and lay down with his head toward the ridge and the rifle and pistol beside him.

The twilight deepened into dark and a fat, full moon

rose. A faint breeze sprang up, stirring the air, and the range to the north emerged in sharp relief. Somewhere a kit fox squalled and a night bird croaked in answer. Joe imagined that he could distinguish pricks of light on the distant mountainside that would be the reservation. He thought of his father. His son, Tom Nehasu had boasted once, was to be a man among men—a chief like his father.

Joe sat up stiffly. He felt spent and dizzy but the night freshness cleared his brain. Whatever he did, he must do tonight. Tomorrow would be too late; daylight gave every advantage to the white man. Now the camp was an island of shadow in the moonlight, without sound or tell-tale movement. He asked himself if Baxter could have fallen into exhausted sleep or a drunken stupor. Or was this merely another trick? Of one thing he could be certain: Baxter dared not leave.

He took a full hour to circle to the opposite side of the water hole, swinging in a wide loop. He studied the mesquite clump for some time, then stole out from the rocks and on his belly began to worm over the still-warm sand. Inches at a time he crept forward, lowering his head to rest and listen. The swelling rhythm of a snore reached him. He was so close he could smell water, but some doubt cautioned him. Baxter's breathing was too even, too controlled. The burro snorted in alarm and Baxter's shape heaved up from the ground. A spurt of red slashed the dark, and sand sprayed in Joe's face.

He ran in a reeling zigzag back to cover and knelt there, for the next shot.

THE SILENCE lengthened. Then came the flat, unmistakable click of a rifle action as one cartridge was ejected and another pumped into the chamber.

"Can you hear me, Joe?" Baxter's voice carried to



him, hoarse and strained. "You want a drink you come walkin' in with your hands up."

The echo rebounded and died. "Next time I won't miss, I'll wing you sure!"

Joe squeezed his hands against the rock. He understood. The white man would shoot only if necessary. A bullet in his body would be proof, evidence that could be traced. A thirst-bloated body would tell nothing except that Joe Neshau had been one foolish Cuyiape boy.

He stared vacantly at his soot-blackened palms. This crevice among the rocks had been an ancient camp site and fire pit. Other Indians, perhaps the prehistoric ancestors of his own people, had slept and cooked here within sight of the seep where they could draw water and better defend themselves against attack. Indians who fought among themselves centuries before the white man—Indians wiser and more experienced than himself. An undercurrent of excitement gripped him.

With a stick he pried at the hardpacked earth. He uncovered some blackened stones and charred bones, and a vague compulsion kept him digging. Striking softer dirt, he enlarged the hole, and excavated a fragment of pottery and a broken *metate* for grinding seeds. Then he found two crude chipped-out arrowheads. He ran his thumb over the jagged edges and struck them together. A tiny spark leaped between his fingers. Carefully, Joe slipped them in his pocket.

Once more he circled Baxter's camp, making for the arroyo behind. He selected a big creosote and dug it up by the roots. Scratched and bleeding, he dragged the bush up the back slope of the ridge to an elevation on the crest. He tore off a piece of his shirt, unraveled the threads and balled them into tinder. Using his belt buckle and one arrowhead, he struck off another spark.

It sputtered out. He tried again. He had seen the old

men of his tribe light their pipes with flint and steel; it had looked so easy he never bothered to learn. Store matches had been good enough. Now he was clumsy, a helpless child with unfamiliar tools. Each time the spark eluded him. His fingers numbed and he blew on them. The cotton wadded between his cupped palms suddenly glowed and burst into flame. Soberly Joe thrust it under the creosote.

Grease hissed and popped and the flames crackled up in rings of black oily smoke. He peered off toward the distant swell of mountains. Someone might see his signal. Some ranger, prospector, even an Indian. Someone might wonder. If he fed the fire, kept it burning through the night, there was still a remote chance. If nothing else, it might scare off Baxter. For Baxter was not a man to take chances.

He started to collect some sagebrush when a shot boomed from the water hole. Baxter broke from the mesquite and ran toward the ridge. Joe clenched his fists. Baxter would stop. He had always stopped before. But the sound of his boots clattered nearer across the rocks. Joe looked around wildly and fell behind a boulder. Whatever happened to him, at least he would run no more.

A minute later Baxter burst into the circle of firelight. He charged at the fire, scattering branches, beating at them in a cold, deliberate fury, grinding out the coals under his feet. The last dying flicker he smothered with dirt. Muttering to himself, he wiped the sweat from his face. He hunched his shoulders and peered around the rim of moon-washed granite. The safety catch of his rifle snapped.

"It won't work, kid," he called. "If you want a drink, stand up."

Crouched a dozen yards away, Joe held his breath. Warily the white man backed off. "I'll be waitin' when

you change your mind." Then he was gone, back to the safety of the flat open sands and the *tinaja*.

Joe sagged against his rock, and the exhaustion moved through him in a dark sluggish stream. He was beyond fear, beyond thirst. He supported his head in his hands, smelling the dry, acrid wood smoke. He wondered how many hours of darkness remained, how long a man could survive without water. Even these simple elemental things he did not know, because he had been too proud to learn. This was the measure of Joe Nehasu, son of a chief, grandson of a chief, now grown soft in the white men's ways. . . .

The stars dimmed and a pale flush tinted the eastern sky. Already the withering breath of another day was settling. With dawn the haze would descend again, blotting out the mountains. Down by the seep a canyon wren warbled, and the burro broke into a restless bray.

Joe finished piling up the last of the brush he had accumulated in an endless round of trips to the arroyo. He tested the long, slick rope of creosote stalks he had so tediously braided together into a sort of fuse. This had taken the better part of the night. Careful not to silhouette himself along the skyline, he uncoiled his fuse and tucked one end of it under the man-high brush heap. His hands trembled as he sparked his tinder on the second try, and puffed it into life. He lighted the near end of the fuse and for an instant watched it writhe and shrivel under the tiny licking flames.

Then he crawled down the slope toward the silent water hole, three hundred yards away. Just as he reached the lower limit of the rocks, flames cracked above him with an explosive pop. A shower of particles whirled high in the air, fanned by a fierce yellow blaze that was visible for miles across the desert.

Joe ducked down. He saw Baxter stumble out of the mesquite. The white man hesitated, an unreal, grotesque

form etched against the night, staring up uncertainly. He gave his belt a hitch and pounded on across the flat at a weary, shambling run. He passed Joe, never slowing or looking back, and climbed up the ridge.

Joe drew a long breath into his lungs and ran noiselessly over the sand.

Dawn spread like a pink stain over the hills, melting away the deeper purple shadows. Flattened among the rocks high above the opposite side of the seep, Joe observed Charlie Baxter's return. The white man walked jerkily, peering from side to side with quick, puzzled looks. He stopped once and stared back at the smoldering ashes of the fire. Then, as though remembering something, he hurried on to the water hole.

Joe could see him moving among the mesquite, searching under each bush. Baxter straightened and scratched his head and looked around. His glance fell on the canvas. Savagely he ripped it aside and slammed down his rifle. He grabbed up a can, shook it against his ear, and flung it down again. On his knees he tested one can after the other. He pushed back his hat and rubbed his sleeve across his face.

Then he picked up the pail and advanced on the seep hole. He bent, scooped up a drink and lifted it to his lips. He seemed to stiffen. The pail dropped from his fingers and rolled away. His head was shaking as if in denial. Slowly the white man raised both hands to his throat.

The sun's red tip bulged above the curve of the earth. Joe lowered his head. He moistened his mouth from Baxter's canteen, soothing away the rawness in his throat, and a cool delicious sensation spread through him. Baxter had the rifle. Joe had the water, enough for his journey home. If Baxter got thirsty he could always drink mescal, forty gallons of it—now slightly diluted in the

seep. If not—Joe shrugged. It was going to be a very hot day.

Perhaps Joe Nehasu might yet learn to be a man.

*The West does strange things to a man*

## THE RANSOM OF MACK

O. HENRY

ME AND old Mack Lonsbury, we got out of that Little Hide-and-Seek gold mine affair with about \$40,000 apiece. I say "old" Mack; but he wasn't old. Forty-one, I should say; but he always seemed old.

"Andy," he says to me, "I'm tired of hustling. You and me have been working hard together for three years. Say we knock off for a while, and spend some of this idle money we've coaxed our way."

"The proposition hits me just right," says I. "Let's be nabobs a while and see how it feels. What'll we do—take in the Niagara Falls, or buck at faro?"

"For a good many years," says Mack, "I've thought that if I ever had extravagant money I'd rent a two-room cabin somewhere, hire a Chinaman to cook, and sit in my stocking feet and read Buckle's History of Civilization."

"That sounds self-indulgent and gratifying without vulgar ostentation," says I, "and I don't see how money could be better invested. Give me a cuckoo clock and a Sep Winner's Self-Instructor for the Banjo, and I'll join you."

A week afterward me and Mack hits this small town of

Piña, about thirty miles out from Denver, and finds an elegant two-room house that just suits us. We deposited half-a-peck of money in the Piña bank and shook hands with every one of the 340 citizens in the town. We brought along the Chinaman and the cuckoo clock and Buckle and the Instructor with us from Denver; and they made the cabin seem like home at once.

Never believe it when they tell you riches don't bring happiness. If you could have seen old Mack sitting in his rocking-chair with his blue-yarn sock feet up in the window and absorbing in that Buckle stuff through his specs you'd have seen a picture of content that would have made Rockefeller jealous. And I was learning to pick out "Old Zip Coon" on the banjo, and the cuckoo was on time with his remarks, and Ah Sing was messing up the atmosphere with the handsomest smell of ham and eggs that ever laid the honeysuckle in the shade. When it got too dark to make out Buckle's nonsense and the notes in the Instructor, me and Mack would light our pipes and talk about science and pearl-diving and sciatica and Egypt and spelling and fish and trade-winds and leather and gratitude and eagles, and a lot of subjects that we'd never had time to explain our sentiments about before.

One evening Mack spoke up and asked me if I was much apprised in the habits and policies of women folks.

"Why, yes," says I, in a tone of voice; "I know 'em from Alfred to Omaha. The feminine nature and similitude," says I, "is as plain to my sight as the Rocky Mountains is to a blue-eyed burro. I'm onto all their little side-steps and punctual discrepancies."

"I tell you, Andy," says Mack, with a kind of sigh, "I never had the least amount of intersection with their predispositions. Maybe I might have had a proneness in respect to their vicinity, but I never took the time. I

made my own living since I was fourteen; and I never seemed to get my ratiocinations equipped with the sentiments usually depicted toward the sect. I sometimes wish I had," says old Mack.

"They're an adverse study," says I, "and adapted to points of view. Although they vary in rationale, I have found 'em quite often obviously differing from each other in divergences of contrast."

"It seems to me," goes on Mack, "that man had better take 'em in and secure his inspirations of the sect when he's young and so preordained. I let my chance go by; and I guess I'm too old now to go hopping into the curriculum."

"Oh, I don't know," I tells him. "Maybe you better credit yourself with a barrel of money and a lot of emancipation from a quantity of discontent. Still, I don't regret my knowledge of 'em," I says. "It takes a man who understands the symptoms and by-plays of women-folks to take care of himself in this world."

We stayed on in Piña because we liked the place. Some folks might enjoy their money with noise and rapture and locomotion; but me and Mack we had had plenty of turmoils and hotel towels. The people were friendly; Ah Sing got the swing of the grub we liked; Mack and Buckle were as thick as two body-snatchers, and I was hitting out a cordial resemblance to "Buffalo Gals, Can't You Come out To-night," on the banjo.

One day I got a telegram from Speight, the man that was working a mine I had an interest in out in New Mexico. I had to go out there; and I was gone two months. I was anxious to get back to Piña and enjoy life once more.

When I struck the cabin I nearly fainted. Mack was standing in the door; and if angels ever wept, I saw no reason why they should be smiling then.

That man was a spectacle. Yes; he was worse; he was a spyglass; he was the great telescope in the Lick Observatory. He had on a coat and shiny shoes and a white vest and a high silk hat; and a geranium as big as an order of spinach was spiked onto his front. And he was smirking and warping his face like an infernal storekeeper or a kid with colic.

"Hello, Andy," says Mack, out of his face. "Glad to see you back. Things have happened since you went away."

"I know it," says I, "and a sacrilegious sight it is. God never made you that way, Mack Lonsbury. Why do you scarify His works with this presumptuous kind of ribaldry?"

"Why, Andy," says he, "they've elected me justice of the peace since you left."

I looked at Mack close. He was restless and inspired. A justice of the peace ought to be disconsolate and assuaged.

Just then a young woman passed on the sidewalk; and I saw Mack kind of half snicker and blush, and then he raised up his hat and smiled and bowed, and she smiled and bowed, and went on by.

"No hope for you," says I, "if you've got the Mary-Jane infirmity at your age. I thought it wasn't going to take on you. And patent leather shoes! All this in two little short months!"

"I'm going to marry the young lady who just passed tonight," says Mack, in a kind of a flutter.

"I forgot something at the post-office," says I, and walked away quick.

I overtook that young woman a hundred yards away. I raised my hat and told her my name. She was about nineteen; and young for her age. She blushed, and then looked at me cool, like I was the snow scene from the "Two Orphans."



"I understand you are to be married tonight," I said.

"Correct," says she. "You got any objections?"

"Listen, sissy," I begins.

"My name is Miss Rebosa Redd," says she in a pained way.

"I know it," says I. "Now, Rebosa, I'm old enough to have owed money to your father. And that old, specious, dressed-up, garbled, sea-sick ptomaine prancing around avidiously like an irremediable turkey gobbler with patent leather shoes on is my best friend. Why did you go and get him invested in this marriage business?"

"Why, he was the only chance there was," answers Miss Rebosa.

"Nay," says I, giving a sickening look of admiration at her complexion and style of features, "with your beauty you might pick any kind of a man. Listen, Rebosa. Old Mack ain't the man you want. He was twenty-two when you was *née* Reed, as the papers say. This bursting into bloom won't last with him. He's all ventilated with oldness and rectitude and decay. Old Mack's down with a case of Indian summer. He overlooked his bet when he was young; and now he's suing Nature for the interest on the promissory note he took from Cupid instead of the cash. Rebosa, are you bent on having this marriage occur?"

"Why, sure I am," says she, oscillating the pansies on her hat, "and so is somebody else, I reckon."

"What time is it to take place?" I asks.

"At six o'clock," says she.

I made up my mind right away what to do. I'd save old Mack if I could. To have a good, seasoned, ineligible man like that turn chicken for a girl that hadn't quit eating slate pencils and buttoning in the back was more than I could look on with easiness.

"Rebosa," says I, earnest, drawing upon my display of

knowledge concerning the feminine intuitions of reason—"ain't there a young man in Piña—a nice young man that you think a heap of?"

"Yep," says Rebosa, nodding her pansies—"Sure there is! What do you think! Gracious!"

"Does he like you?" I asks. "How does he stand in the matter?"

"Crazy," says Rebosa. "Ma has to wet down the front steps to keep him from sitting there all the time. But I guess that'll be all over after tonight," she winds up with a sigh.

"Rebosa," says I, "you don't really experience any of this adoration called love for old Mack, do you?"

"Lord! no," says the girl, shaking her head. "I think he's as dry as a lava bed. The ideal!"

"Who is this young man that you like, Rebosa?" I inquires.

"It's Eddie Bayles," says she. "He clerks in Crosby's Grocery. But he don't make but thirty-five a month. Ella Noakes was wild about him once."

"Old Mack tells me," I says, "that he's going to marry you at six o'clock this evening."

"That's the time," says she. "It's to be at our house."

"Rebosa," says I, "listen to me. If Eddie Bayles had a thousand dollars cash—a thousand dollars, mind you, would buy him a store of his own—if you and Eddie had that much to excuse matrimony on, would you consent to marry him this evening at five o'clock?"

The girl looks at me a minute; and I can see these inaudible cogitations going on inside of her, as women will.

"A thousand dollars?" says she. "Of course I would."

"Come on," says I. "We'll go and see Eddie."

We went up to Crosby's store and called Eddie outside. He looked to be estimable and freckled; and he had chills and fever when I made my proposition.

"At five o'clock?" says he, "for a thousand dollars? Please don't wake me up! Well, you *are* the rich uncle retired from the spice business in India! I'll buy out old Crosby and run the store myself."

We went inside and got old man Crosby apart and explained it. I wrote my check for a thousand dollars and handed it to him. If Eddie and Rebosa married each other at five he was to turn the money over to them.

And then I gave 'em my blessing, and went to wander in the wildwood for a season. I sat on a log and made cogitations on life and old age and the zodiac and the ways of women and all the disorder that goes with a lifetime. I passed myself congratulations that I had probably saved my old friend Mack from his attack of Indian summer. I knew when he got well of it and shed his infatuation and his patent leather shoes, he would feel grateful. "To keep old Mack disinvolved," thinks I, "from relapses like this, is worth more than a thousand dollars." And most of all I was glad that I'd made a study of women, and wasn't to be deceived any by their means of conceit and evolution.

It must have been half-past five when I got back home. I stepped in; and there sat old Mack on the back of his neck in his old clothes with his blue socks on the window and the History of Civilization propped up on his knees.

"This don't look like getting ready for a wedding at six," I says, to seem innocent.

"Oh," says Mack, reaching for his tobacco, "that was postponed back to five o'clock. They sent me a note saying the hour had been changed. It's all over now. What made you stay away so long, Andy?"

"You heard about the wedding?" I asks.

"I operated it," says he. "I told you I was justice of the peace. The preacher is off East to visit his folks, and I'm the only one in town that can perform the dispensations of marriage. I promised Eddie and Rebosa a month ago

I'd marry 'em. He's a busy lad; and he'll have a grocery of his own some day."

"He will," says I.

"There was lots of women at the wedding," says Mack, smoking up. "But I didn't seem to get any ideas from 'em. I wish I was informed in the structure of their attainments like you said you was."

"That was two months ago," says I, reaching up for the banjo.

*The whole deal hinged on a little tobacco*

## A DAY IN TOWN

ERNEST HAYCOX

THEY REACHED Two Dance around ten that morning and turned into the big lot between the courthouse and the Cattle King Hotel. Most of the homesteaders camped here when they came to town, for after a slow ride across the sage flats, underneath so hot and so yellow a sun, the shade of the huge locust trees was a comfort. Joe Blount unhitched and watered the horses and tied them to a pole. He was a long and loose and deliberate man who had worked with his hands too many years to waste motion, and if he dallied more than usual over his chores now it was because he dreaded the thing ahead of him.

His wife sat on the wagon's seat, holding the baby. She had a pin in her mouth and she was talking around it to young Tom: "Stay away from the horses on the street and don't you go near the railroad tracks. Keep hold of May's hand. She's too little to be alone, you remember. Be sure to come back by noon."

Young Tom was seven and getting pretty thin from growth. The trip to town had him excited. He kept nodding his sun-bleached head, he kept tugging at little May's hand, and then both of them ran headlong for the street and turned the corner of the Cattle King, shrilly whooping as they disappeared.

Blount looked up at his wife. She was a composed woman and not one to bother people with talk and sometimes it was hard for a man to know what was in her mind. But he knew what was there now, for all their problems were less than this one and they had gone over it pretty thoroughly the last two-three months. He moved his fingers up to the pocket of his shirt and dropped them immediately away, searching the smoky horizon with his glance. He didn't expect to see anything over there, but it was better than meeting her eyes at this moment. He said in his patiently low voice: "Think we could make it less than three hundred?"

The baby moved its arms, its warm-wet fingers aimlessly brushing Hester Blount's cheeks. She said: "I don't see how. We kept figuring—and it never gets smaller. You know best, Joe."

"No," he murmured, "it never gets any smaller. Well, three hundred. That's what I'll ask for." And yet, with the chore before him, he kept his place by the dropped wagon tongue. He put his hands in his pockets and drew a long breath and looked at the powdered earth below him with a sustained gravity, and was like this when Hester Blount spoke again. He noticed that she was pretty gentle with her words: "Why, now, Joe, you go on. It isn't like you were shiftless and hadn't tried. He knows you're a hard worker and he knows your word's good. You just go ahead."

"Guess we've both tried," he agreed. "And I guess he knows how it's been. We ain't alone." He went out toward the street, reminding himself of this. They weren't

alone. All the people along Christmas Creek were burned out, so it wasn't as if he had failed because he didn't know how to farm. The thought comforted him a good deal; it restored a little of his pride. Crossing the street toward Dunmire's stable, he met Chess Roberts, with whom he had once punched cattle on the Hat outfit, and he stopped in great relief and palavered with Chess for a good ten minutes until, looking back, he saw his wife still seated on the wagon. That sight vaguely troubled him and he drawled to Chess, "Well, I'll see you later," and turned quite slowly toward the bank.

There was nothing in the bank's old-fashioned room to take a man's attention. Yet when he came into its hot, shaded silence Joe Blount removed his hat and felt ill at ease as he walked toward Lane McKercher. There was a pine desk here and on the wall a railroad map showing the counties of the Territory in colors. Over at the other side of the room stood the cage where McKercher's son waited on the trade.

MCKERCHER was big and bony and gray and his eyes could cut. They were that penetrating, as everybody agreed. "Been a long time since you came to town. Sit down and have a talk," and his glance saw more about Joe Blount than the homesteader himself could ever tell. "How's Christmas Creek?"

Blount settled in the chair. He said, "Why, just fine," and laid his hands over the hat in his lap. Weather had darkened him and work had thinned him and gravity remained like a stain on his cheeks. He was, McKercher recalled, about thirty years old, had once worked as a puncher on Hat and had married a girl from a small ranch over in the Yellows. Thirty wasn't so old, yet the country was having its way with Joe Blount. When he dropped his head the skin around his neck formed a loose crease and his mouth had that half-severe expres-

sion which comes from too much trouble. This was what McKercher saw. This and the blue army shirt, washed and mended until it was as thin as cotton, and the man's long hard hands lying so loose before him.

McKercher said, "A little dry over your way?"

"Oh," said Blount, "a little. Yeah, a little bit dry."

The banker sat back and waited, and the silence ran on a long while. Bount moved around in the chair and lifted his hand and reversed the hat on his lap. His eyes touched McKercher and passed quickly on to the ceiling. He stifled again, not comfortable. One hand reached up to the pocket of his shirt, dropping quickly back.

"Something on your mind, Joe?"

"Why," said Blount, "Hester and I have figured it out pretty close. It would take about three hundred dollars until next crop. Don't see how it could be less. There'd be seed and salt for stock and grub to put in and I guess some clothes for the kids. Seems like a lot but we can't seem to figure it any smaller."

"A loan?" said McKercher.

"Why, yes," said Blount, relieved that the explaining was over.

"Now let's see. You've got another year to go before you get title to your place. So that's no security. How was your wheat?"

"Burnt out. No rain over there in April."

"How much stock?"

"Well, not much. Just two cows. I sold off last fall. The graze was pretty skinny." He looked at McKercher and said in the briefest way, "I got nothing to cover this loan. But I'm a pretty good worker."

McKercher turned his eyes toward the desk. There wasn't much to be seen behind the cropped gray whiskers of his face. According to the country this was why he wore them—so that a man could never tell what he figured. But his shoulders rose and dropped and he spoke

regretfully: "There's no show for you on that ranch, Joe. Dry farming—it won't do. All you fellows are burned out. This country never was meant for it. It's cattle land and that's about all."

He let it go like that, and waited for the homesteader to come back with a better argument. Only, there was no argument. Joe Blount's lips changed a little and his hands flattened on the peak of his hat. He said in a slow, mild voice, "Well, I can see it your way all right," and got up. His hand strayed up to the shirt pocket again, and fell away—and McKercher, looking straight into the man's eyes, saw an expression there hard to define. The banker shook his head. Direct refusal was on his tongue and it wasn't like him to postpone it, which he did. "I'll think it over. Come back about two o'clock."

"Sure," said Blount, and turned across the room, his long frame swinging loosely, his knees springing as he walked, saving energy. After he had gone out of the place McKercher remembered the way the homesteader's hand had gone toward the shirt pocket. It was a gesture that remained in the banker's mind.

BLOUNT STOPPED outside the bank. Hester, at this moment, was passing down toward the dry-goods store with the baby in her arms. He waited until she had gone into the store and then walked on toward the lower end of town, not wanting her to see him just then. He knew McKercher would turn him down at two o'clock. He had heard it pretty plainly in the banker's tone, and he was thinking of all the things he had meant to explain to McKercher. He was telling McKercher that one or two bad years shouldn't count against a man. That the land on Christmas Creek would grow the best winter wheat in the world. That you had to take the dry with the wet. But he knew he'd never say any of this. The talk wasn't in him, and never had been. Young Tom and little May



were across the street, standing in front of Swing's restaurant, seeing something that gripped their interest. Joe Blount looked at them from beneath the lowered brim of his hat; they were skinny with age and they needed some clothes. He went on by, coming against Chess Roberts near the saloon.

Chess said: "Well, we'll have a drink on this."

The smell of the saloon drifted out to Joe Blount, its odor of spilled whisky and tobacco smoke starting the saliva in his jaws, freshening a hunger. But Hester and the kids were on his mind and something told him it was unseemly, the way things were. He said: "Not right now, Chess. I got some chores to tend. What you doing?"

"You ain't heard? I'm ridin' for Hat again."

Blount said: "Kind of quiet over my way. Any jobs for a man on Hat?"

"Not now," said Chess. "We been layin' off summer help. A little bit tough this year, Joe. You havin' trouble on Christmas Creek?"

"Me? Not a bit, Chess. We get along. It's just that I like to keep workin'."

After Chess had gone, Joe Blount laid the point of his shoulder against the saloon wall and watched his two children walk hand in hand past the windows of the general store. Young Tom pointed and swung his sister around; and both of them had their faces against a window, staring in. Blount pulled his eyes away. It took the kids to do things that scraped a man's pride pretty hard, that made him feel his failure. Under the saloon's board awning lay shade, but sweat cracked through his forehead and he thought quickly of what he could do. Maybe Dummire could use a man to break horses. Maybe he could get on hauling wood for the feed store. This was Saturday and the big ranch owners would be coming down the Two Dance grade pretty soon. Maybe there was a hole on one of those outfits. It was an hour until

noon, and at noon he had to go back to Hester. He turned toward the feed store.

HESTER BLOUNT stood at the dry-goods counter of Vetten's store. Vetten came over, but she said, "I'm just trying to think." She laid the baby on the counter and watched it lift its feet straight in the air and aimlessly try to catch them with its hands; and she was thinking that the family needed a good many things. Underwear all around, and stockings and overalls. Little May had to have some material for a dress, and some ribbon. You couldn't let a girl grow up without a few pretty things, even out on Christmas Creek. It wasn't good for the girl. Copper-toed shoes for young Tom, and a pair for his father; and lighter buttoned ones for May. None of these would be less than two dollars and a half, and it was a crime the way it mounted up. And plenty of flannel for the baby.

She had not thought of herself until she saw the dark gray bolt of silk lying at the end of the counter, and when she saw it something happened to her heart. It wasn't good to be so poor that the sight of a piece of silk made you feel this way. She turned from it, ashamed of her thoughts—as though she had been guilty of extravagance. Maybe if she were young again and still pretty, and wanting to catch a man's eyes, it might not be so silly to think of clothes. But she was no longer young or pretty and she had her man. She could take out her love of nice things on little May, who was going to be a very attractive girl. As soon as Joe was sure of the three hundred dollars she'd come back here and get what they all had to have—and somehow squeeze out the few pennies for dress material and the hair ribbon.

She stood here thinking of these things and so many others—a tall and rather comely woman in her early thirties, dark-faced and carrying an even, sweet-lipped grav-

ity while her eyes sought the dry-goods shelves and her hand unconsciously patted the baby's round middle.

A woman came bustling into the store and said in a loud, accented voice: "Why, Hester Blount, of all the people I never did expect to see!"

Hester said, "Now, isn't this a surprise!" and the two took each other's hands and fell into a quick half embrace. Ten years ago they had been girls together over in the Two Dance, Hester and this Lila Evenson who had married a town man. Lila was turning into a heavy woman and, like many heavy women, she loved white and wore it now, though it made her look big as a house. Above the tight collar of the dress, her skin was a flushed red and a second chin faintly trembled when she talked. Hester Blount stood motionless, listening to that outpour of words, feeling the quick search of Lila's eyes. Lila, she knew, would be taking everything in—her worn dress, her heavy shoes, and the lines of her face.

"AND ANOTHER baby!" said Lila and bent over it and made a long gurgling sound. "What a lucky woman! That's three? But ain't it a problem, out there on Christmas Creek? Even in town here I worry so much over my one darling."

"No," said Hester, "we don't worry. How is your husband?"

"So well," said Lila. "You know, he's bought the drug-store from old Kerrin, who is getting old. He has done so well. We are lucky, as we keep telling ourselves. And that reminds me. You must come up to dinner. You really must come this minute."

They had been brought up on adjoining ranches and had ridden to the same school and to the same dances. But that was so long ago, and so much had changed them. And Lila was always a girl to throw her fortunes in other people's faces. Hester said, gently, regretfully:

"Now, isn't it too bad! We brought a big lunch in the wagon, thinking it would be easier. Joe has so many chores to do here."

"I have often wondered about you, away out there," said Lila. "Have you been well? It's been such a hard year for everybody. So many homesteaders going broke."

"We are well," said Hester slowly, a small, hard pride in her tone. "Everything's been fine."

"Now, that's nice," murmured Lila, her smile remaining fixed; but her eyes, Hester observed, were sharp and busy—and reading too much. Lila said, "Next time you come and see us," and bobbed her head and went out of the store, her clothes rustling in this quiet. Hester's lips went sharp-shut and quick color burned on her cheeks. She took up the baby and turned into the street again and saw that Tom hadn't come yet to the wagon. The children were out of sight and there was nothing to do but wait. Hearing the far-off halloo of a train's whistle, she walked on under the board galleries to the depot.

Heat swirled around her and light flashed up from polished spots on the iron rails. Around her lay the full monotony of the desert, so familiar, so wide—and sometimes so hard to bear. Backed against the yellow depot wall, she watched the train rush forward, a high plume of white steam rising to the sky as it whistled to warn them. And then it rushed by, engine and cars, in a great smash of sound that stirred the baby in her arms. She saw men standing on the platforms. Women's faces showed in the car windows, serene and idly curious and not a part of Hester's world at all; and afterward the train was gone, leaving behind the heated smell of steel and smoke. When the quiet came back it was lonelier than before. She turned back to the wagon.

It was then almost twelve. The children came up, hot and weary and full of excitement. Young Tom said:

"The school is right in town. They don't have to walk at all. It's right next to the houses. Why don't they have to walk three miles like us?" And May said: "I saw a china doll with real clothes and painted eyelashes. Can I have a china doll?"

Hester changed the baby on the wagon seat. She said: "Walking is good for people, Tom. Why should you expect a doll now, May? Christmas is the time. Maybe Christmas we'll remember."

"Well, I'm hungry."

"Wait till your father comes," said Hester.

When he turned in from the street, later, she knew something was wrong. He was always a deliberate man, not much given to smiling. But he walked with his shoulders down and when he came up he said only: "I suppose we ought to eat." He didn't look directly at her. He had his own strong pride and she knew this wasn't like him—to stand by the wagon's wheel, so oddly watching his children. She reached under the seat for the box of sandwiches and the cups and the jug of cold coffee. She said: "What did he say, Joe?"

"Why, nothing yet. He said come back at two. He wanted to think about it."

She murmured, "It won't hurt us to wait," and laid out the sandwiches. They sat on the shaded ground and ate, the children with a quick, starved impatience, with an excited and aimless talk. Joe Blount looked at them carefully. "What was it you saw in the restaurant, sonny?"

"It smelled nice," said young May. "The smell came out the door."

Joe Blount cleared his throat. "Don't stop like that in front of the restaurant again."

"Can we go now?" Can we go down by the depot?"

"You hold May's hand," said Blount, and watched them leave. He sat cross-legged before his wife, his big

hands idle, his expression unstirred. The sandwich, which was salted bacon grease spread on Hester's potato bread, lay before him. "Ain't done enough this morning to be hungry," he said.

"I know."

THEY WERE never much at talking. And now there wasn't wasn't much to say. She knew that he had been turned down. She knew that at two o'clock he would go and come back empty-handed. Until then she wouldn't speak of it, and neither would he. And she was thinking with a woman's realism of what lay before them. They had nothing except this team and wagon and two cows standing unfed in the barn lot. Going back to Christmas Creek now would be going back only to pack up and leave. For they had delayed asking for this loan until the last sack of flour in the storehouse had been emptied.

He said: "I been thinking. Not much to do on the ranch this fall. I ought to get a little outside work."

"Maybe you should."

"Fact is, I've tried a few places. Kind of quiet. But I can look around some more."

She said, "I'll wait here."

He got up, a rangy, spare man who found it hard to be idle. He looked at her carefully and his voice didn't reveal anything: "If I were you I don't believe I'd order anything at the stores until I come back."

She watched the way he looked out into the smoky horizon, the way he held his shoulders. When he turned away, not meeting her eyes, her lips made a sweet line across her dark face, a softly maternal expression showing. She said, "Joe," and waited until he turned. "Joe, we'll always get along."

He went away again, around the corner of the Cattle King. She shifted her position on the wagon's seat, her hand gently patting the baby who was a little cross from

the heat. One by one she went over the list of necessary things in her mind, and one by one, erased them. It was hard to think of little May without a ribbon bow in her hair, without a good dress. Boys could wear old clothes, as long as they were warm; but a girl, a pretty girl, needed the touch of niceness. It was hard to be poor.

COMING OUT of the bank at noon, Lane McKercher looked into the corral space and saw the Blounts eating their lunch under the locust tree. He turned down Arapahoe Street, walking through the comforting shade of the poplars to the big square house at the end of the lane. At dinner hour his boy took care of the bank, and so he ate his meal with the housekeeper in a dining room whose shades had been tightly drawn—the heavy mid-day meal of a man who had developed his hunger and his physique from early days on the range. Afterward he walked to the living-room couch and lay down with a paper over his face for the customary nap.

A single fly made a racket in the deep quiet, but it was not this that kept him from sleeping. In some obscure manner the shape of Joe Blount came before him—the long, patient and work-stiffened shape of a man whose eyes had been so blue and so calm in face of refusal. Well, there had been something behind those eyes for a moment, and then it had passed away, eluding McKercher's sharp glance.

They were mostly all patient ones and seldom speaking—these men that came off the deep desert. A hard life had made them that way, as McKercher knew, who had shared that life himself. Blount was no different than the others and many times McKercher had refused these others, without afterthoughts. It was some other thing that kept his mind on Blount. Not knowing why, he lay quietly on the couch, trying to find the reason.

The country, he told himself, was cattle country, and

those who tried to dry-farm it were bound to fail. He had seen them fail, year after year. They took their wagons and their families out toward Christmas Creek, loaded high with plunder; and presently they came back with their wagons baked and their eyebrows bleached and nothing left. With their wives sitting in the wagons, old from work, with their children long and thin from lack of food. They had always failed and always would. Blount was a good man, but so were most of the rest. Why should he be thinking of Blount?

He rose at one o'clock, feeling the heat and feeling his age; and washed his hands and face with good cold water. Lighting a cigar, he strolled back down Arapahoe and walked across the square toward the Cattle King. Mrs. Blount sat on the wagon's seat, holding a baby. The older youngsters, he noticed, were in the cool runway of Dunmire's stable. He went into the saloon, though not to drink.

"Nick," he said, "Joe Blount been in for a drink yet?"

The saloonkeeper looked up from an empty poker table. "No," he said.

McKercher went out, crossing to Billy Saxton's feed store. Deep in the big shed Billy Saxton weighed hay bales on his heavy scales. He stopped and sopped the sweat off his forehead, and smiled. "Bankin'," he stated, "is easier."

"Maybe it is," said Lane McKercher. "You know Joe Blount well?"

"Why, he's all right. Used to ride for Hat. Old man Dale liked him. He was in here a while back."

"To buy feed?"

"No, he wanted to haul wood for me."

McKercher went back up the street toward the bank. Jim Benbow was coming down the road from the Two Dance hills, kicking a long streamer of dust behind. Sun



struck the windows on the north side of town, setting up a brilliant explosion of light. Joe Blount came out of the stable and turned over toward the Cattle King, waiting for Benbow.

In the bank, McKercher said to his son, "All right, you go eat," and sat down at his pine desk. Benbow put his head through the front door, calling: "I'll need five thousand this week, Mac—until the stock check comes in."

"All right."

He sat quite still at the desk, stern with himself because he could not recall why he kept thinking of Joe Blount. Men were everything to Lane McKercher, who watched them pass along this street year in and year out, who studied them with his sharp eyes and made his judgments concerning them. If there was something in a man, it had to come out. And what was it in Joe Blount he couldn't name? The echoes of the big clock on the wall rattled around the droning silence of the bank like the echo of feet striking the floor; it was then a quarter of two, and he knew he had to refuse Blount a second time. He could not understand why he had not made the first turndown final.

Blount met Jim Benbow on the corner of the Cattle King, directly after Hat's owner had left the bank. He shook Benbow's hand, warmed and pleased by the tall cattleman's smile of recognition. Benbow said: "Been a long time since I saw you. How's Christmas Creek, Joe?"

"Fine—just fine. You're lookin' good. You don't get old."

"Well, let's go have a little smile on that."

"Why, thanks, no, I was wonderin'. It's pretty quiet on my place right now. Not much to do till spring. You need a man?"

Benbow shook his head. "Not a thing doing, Joe. Sorry."

"Of course—of course," murmured Blount. "I didn't figure there would be."

HE STOOD against the Cattle King's low porch rail after Benbow had gone down the street, his glance lifted and fixed on the smoky light of the desert beyond town. Shade lay around him but sweat began to creep below his hatbrim. He was closely and quickly thinking of places that might be open for a man, and knew there were none in town and none on the range. This was the slack season of the year. The children were over in front of the grocery store, stopped by its door, hand in hand, round, dark cheeks lifted and still. Blount swung his shoulders around, cutting them out of his sight.

SULLEN BEN DRURY came out of the courthouse and passed Blount, removing his cigar and speaking, and replacing the cigar again. Its smell was like acid biting at Blount's jaw corners, and suddenly he faced the bank with the odd and terrible despair of a man who has reached the end of hope, and a strange thought came to him, which was that the doors of that bank were wide open and money lay on the counter inside for the taking.

He stood very still, his head down, and after a while he thought: "An unseemly thing for a man to hold in his head." It was two o'clock then and he turned over the square, going toward the bank with his legs springing as he walked and all his muscles loose. In the quietness of the room his boots dragged up odd sound. He stood by Lane McKercher's desk, waiting without any show of expression; he knew what McKercher would say.

McKercher said, slowly and with an odd trace of irritation: "Joe, you're wasting your time on Christmas Creek. And you'd waste the loan."

Blount said, mildly and courteously: "I can understand

your view. Don't blame you for not loanin' without security." He looked over McKercher's head, his glance going through the window to the far strip of horizon. "Kind of difficult to give up a thing," he mused. "I figured to get away from ridin' for other folks and ride for myself. Well, that was why we went to Christmas Creek. Maybe a place the kids could have later. Man wants his children to have somethin' better than he had."

"Not on Christmas Creek," said McKercher. He watched Joe Blount with a closer and sharper interest, bothered by a feeling he could not name. Bothered by it and turned impatient by it.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Blount. "Bad luck don't last forever." Then he said, "Well, I shouldn't be talkin'. I thank you for your time." He put on his hat, and his big hand moved up across his shirt, to the pocket there—and dropped away. He turned toward the door.

"Hold on," said Lane. "Hold on a minute." He waited till Blount came back to the desk. He opened the desk's drawer and pulled out a can of cigars, holding them up. "Smoke?"

There was a long delay, and it was strange to see the way Joe Blount looked at the cigars, with his lips closely together. He said, his voice dragging on the words, "I guess not, but thanks."

Lane McKercher looked down at the desk, his expression breaking out of its maintained strictness. The things in a man had to come out, and he knew now why Joe Blount had stayed so long in his mind. It made him look up. "I have been considering this. It won't ever be a matter of luck on Christmas Creek. It's a matter of water. When I passed the feed store today I noticed a second-hand windmill in the back. It will do. You get hold of Plummer Bodry and find out his price for driving you a well. I never stake a man unless I stake him right. We

will figure the three hundred and whatever it takes to put up a tank and windmill. When you buy your supplies today, just say you've got credit here."

"Why, now—" began Joe Blount in his slow, soft voice, "I—"

But Lane McKercher said to his son, just coming back from lunch, "I want you to bring your ledger over here." He kept on talking and Joe Blount, feeling himself pushed out, turned and left the bank.

McKercher's son came over. "Made that loan after all. Why?"

McKercher said only, "He's a good man, Bob." But he knew the real reason. A man that smoked always carried his tobacco in his shirt pocket. Blount had kept reaching, out of habit, for something that wasn't there. Well, a man like Blount loved this one small comfort and never went without it unless actually destitute. But Blount wouldn't admit it, and had been too proud to take a free cigar. Men were everything—and the qualities in them came out sooner or later, as with Blount. A windmill and water was a good risk with a fellow like that.

HESTER WATCHED him cross the square and come toward her, walking slowly, with his shoulders squared. She patted the baby's back and gently rocked it, and wondered at the change. When he came up he said, casually, "I'll hitch and drive around to the store, so we can load the stuff you buy."

She watched him carefully, so curious to know how it had happened. But she only said: "We'll get along."

He was smiling then, he who seldom smiled. "I guess you need a few things for yourself. We can spare something for that."

"Only a dress and some ribbon, for May. A girl needs something nice." She paused, and afterward added, be-

cause she knew how real his need was, "Joe, you buy yourself some tobacco."

He let out a long, long breath. "I believe I will," he said. They stood this way, both gently smiling. They needed no talk to explain anything to each other. They had been through so much these last few years. Hardship and trouble had drawn them so close together that words were unnecessary. So they were silent, remembering so much, and understanding so much, and still smiling. Presently he turned to hitch up.

*Killer or coward, why wouldn't he shoot?*

## LEAD SHY

PETER DAWSON

HE WASN'T at all sure he'd go, having certain ideas about trouble and certain good reasons for wanting to avoid it. But finally, over his supper, he made up his mind.

So he waited until after dark as they'd asked, and only then saddled the dun horse and headed up across the meadow into the hills. In the next half hour he cut two trails and stayed wide of them, again as he'd been told. Forty more minutes put him in the timber up Squaw Canyon. A rider with a Winchester slanted across the saddle stopped him beyond the second bridge. He gave his name and was waved on.

Whit Ames came out the door of the line-shack as he rode up, saying relievedly, "Glad you decided to come, Steve."

One of Whit's crewmen took the dun off into the trees

and the old rancher led the way over to the shack, his banty-rooster frame dwarfed by Steve's medium-tall and stocky one. They went in and Whit closed the door before striking a match.

They were all here, Steve saw, six men with faces hard-set in the sudden flare of light. Someone had thought to hang a blanket across the sashless window and the cool breeze slanting down off the peaks stirred the blanket a little as Whit lit a candle and stuck it to the top of the rusty stove.

Then Whit announced, "Steve makes it a solid lineup against Sanders. John, let's get down to business."

John Rice singled Steve out with his steady glance. "We weren't sure about, Cross," he said. "Some of us aren't even yet. No one's ever seen you pack a gun."

He left it like that and the faint politeness that edged his words took the sting out of them. Steve realized that they must have arranged it beforehand that the Bench's biggest owners should have this ticklish job of sounding him out. Naturally, they weren't taking any chances.

He wondered how he could tell them. Finally he decided he couldn't and said, "No. But I'm with you all the way against Sanders."

"Are you Quaker, Steve?" Whit Ames asked quietly.

Steve's lean face broke into its ready smile. "No."

John Rice looked at Whit with a question in his eyes and then Amos Wyles spoke up, gruffly saying, "Hell, John, he'll count for as much as me. I couldn't put a hole through a barn if I was inside it."

Joe White grunted his agreement and the other two nodded and John Rice caught that before his glance swung back to Steve. "Guess that settles it," he said, the sternness going out of his face as he added, "So let's get on with this, Whit."

A general relief eased the tension now. Joe White took out a sack of tobacco dust and began rolling up a smoke

as Whit hitched up his trousers and began, "The idea is that we go to the meetin' tomorrow with some proposition that'll keep Mart Sanders from making this steal. We can forget the sheriff. Even if we could count on him, Sanders has the law on his side. It's legal for him to throw his crew onto grass to homestead it."

"But it's always been free range," Amos Wyles protested. "We've all shared it for thirty winters. Now this gent gets too big for his britches. If he goes through with it, we wind up a bunch of ten-cow outfits. Then there's Norma Fitzhugh—" He stopped there, not knowing how to go on.

"We all hate it on that account," John Rice said. "Love's a funny thing. As far as that goes, we all thought pretty good of Mart until this came up. I don't hold it against Norma."

"Who does?" Amos bridled.

"Another thing," Whit inserted. "One of us'll have to do the talking for the whole crowd at the meetin' tomorrow."

They all saw the way he looked at Steve now and Joe White was quick to say, "If Steve don't pack a gun, why not him? That'll show Sanders we're not trying to stir up trouble."

Steve shook his head and was about to say something when John Rice put in his word. "That's a sound idea."

"Hold on, Steve," Joe said, anticipating Steve's protest. "Think it over. We're all more or less old-timers here. You're not. So you won't be up there workin' off any grudges. Like the one my father bore old man Sanders, never again speakin' to him. Or like John here, buckin' the sheriff last election. You've got a lot of friends, Steve, and you're the only one of us—"

He broke off, cocking his head toward the door, listening. Then the rest of them heard it, heard the slow hoof-falls of a horse sounding from below along the clearing.

Whit Ames growled, "They were told not to bother us." He leaned over and blew out the candle and went slowly to the door, opening it.

Steve had barely made out Whit's shape against the starlight beyond when he saw Whit suddenly stiffen and push his coat aside and lift out a Colt's.

Then Whit was calling, "Who is it?"

"Just me, Whit," came an answer.

Steve gave a start, recognizing that voice. Alongside him, John Rice breathed sharply, "Now who told her we'd be up here?"

STEVE HEARD the horse walking up to the shack and shortly there came the squeal of a stirrup-leather and then Whit was asking, "How did you know, Norma?"

"Mart told me," Norma Fitzhugh's voice answered. Just then she stepped up to the door so that they could see her and she asked, "Why didn't you let me know about this? Or don't I count on the Bench any longer?"

"Come in, Norma," John Rice said in a tired voice.

She followed Whit in through the door and someone lit the candle again. And there she stood, a tall slim girl with cornsilk hair, wearing a man's outfit of waist-overalls and dark red flannel shirt. There was that alert bright look to her eyes as her glance briefly touched each of them, Steve the last.

She smiled at him, saying, "Hello, Steve. I was afraid you wouldn't come. I can see Mart's face when he finds out you're with us. The one good thing he's ever said about this was that he's sorry to be pushing you around."

"What's behind all this, Norma?" John Rice asked angrily. "Why should Mart hate us so?"

"Why? For a lot of reasons." She was serious now. "You, John, because you fought him last election. And maybe because you own the biggest brand on the slope.



He hates Joe because Lem White would never speak to his father. He can't stand Whit because he thinks Whit stole those eight lower sections from his family. He could even hate me because dad always thought his old man got his start by rustling. He wants to get even."

"Yet you're marryin' him," Whit said in his gentle way.

She looked at him and Steve noticed the way her head tilted up proudly, the candlelight etching her flawless profile to show strength beneath the prettiness. "Yes, Whit, maybe I am marrying him," she said. "But not until he's learned his lesson. If he learns it, well and good. If he doesn't—" She raised her shoulders, leaving it like that, adding, "Which is my reason for being here. I want to stop him as much as you do. Maybe more."

It struck Steve that none of them, not even John Rice, for a moment questioned her right to be here after that straightforward statement. Joe White took up where he had left off before her coming had interrupted things. It was decided over Steve's protest that he would be spokesman for the group at tomorrow's meeting of the cattle association. For a time they discussed ways and means of discouraging Mart Sanders from his plan of homesteading the vast range that gave all the Bench outfits rich winter graze. No one could suggest a way beyond an open fight. And no one except Norma dared suggest that.

"Why not?" she asked, after they had argued that it wasn't the place of the Bench outfits to bring this to a shootout. "Dad would turn in his grave if he heard this kind of talk. I have five men on the place, including the cook. You can have all five and I'll work in the kitchen myself if you'll get together and lay down the law to Mart. A year from now he'll have all that water fenced off and we'll be shoved back into the hills. He must be shown he can't get away with a thing like this."

"But he's got the law on his side, Norma," Whit said. "And the sheriff's his man. The minute we fire a shot, there'll be warrants out for us."

The argument went on. The candle burned down and another took its place. In the end, when John Rice looked at his watch and remarked that in another quarter hour it would be midnight, nothing much had been decided. Tomorrow they would all attend the meeting and Steve would state their case. If Mart Sanders didn't back down, John Rice would take the stage to Sweetwater and see the federal commissioner, although that was a forlorn hope.

When they all rode back down the canyon there wasn't much talking. Whit and Joe White turned off where the upper trail forked and when Steve left them Norma came with him, telling the rest, "Might as well take the short cut," as she said her good nights.

She and Steve were riding through the pines half a mile below when he said, "They forgot to ask you how Mart knew we were up there."

"He wouldn't say," she told him. "But I suppose he's bought off one of John Rice's crew."

She waited for him to comment on that and presently, when he didn't, she said almost savagely, "None of you know how set Mart is in this. And I won't have it, Steve! If he finds out he can treat people this way, it's the way he'll treat me. I'd leave him if he ever tried it."

"He'll be hard to stop," Steve drawled.

They went on for a time in silence, Steve leading the way through the draw above the meadow where the scrub-oak was a hard tangle to ride through.

Below, she brought her horse even with him again, saying, "I'm glad they picked you to speak for us, Steve. You have no other quarrel with Mart. And you don't even carry a gun."

He laughed softly, "So they reminded me."

"Why is it, Steve?"

"Why is what?"

"That you never carry one."

His impulse was to tell her the whole thing, for his feelings toward this girl were strong, dating back to his first week in this country nearly five years ago. But then the stubbornness and the pride that were in him crowded back the urge and made him say simply, "It keeps me out of trouble, Norm."

"Just that? Nothing more."

"Nothing you'd understand."

All the way down to his cabin along the meadow neither of them spoke. He knew that his answer had offended her and it made him angry, partly with himself for having spoken so bluntly, partly with her for never having given him reason for sharing this confidence he had never shared with anyone. *She must know how I feel*, he told himself. But then he knew she didn't. She belonged to Mart Sanders and, as usual, that realization laid a deep depression through him.

He got to thinking about a way he might easily settle all this trouble, discarding the idea at once. Then he thought of something else that lifted a strong excitement in him and from then on as far as his gate he wasn't thinking of much else.

She said, matter-of-factly, "Good night, Steve," not even stopping at the gate but drifting her horse over toward the trail.

He had to call out to make her hear, asking, "What time'll you be going in tomorrow, Norm?"

She reined in, turned in the saddle to look back at him. "Around nine. Why?"

"Want to pick me up on your way past?"

"Yes, I'd like to, Steve." There was some life in her voice now.

"Don't forget," he said.

"I won't. Good night, Steve."

Later, after heating up some coffee, he pulled the brass-bound trunk from under his bed and dug out the horn-handled .44.

He spent a good hour wiping off the grease and oiling the weapon. The leather loops of the belt had corroded the shells a dark green. *They'll do, even if a few won't go off*, he decided.

It was ten minutes short of nine when Norma topped the rise in the trail and started down along the half-mile slope toward Steve's cabin. She was less than half-way down the slope when she saw him ride out from behind the barn and head up across the meadow. She tried to think of what might be taking him away from the cabin when he had asked her to stop by for him. Then she called, afterward realizing that the distance was too great for him to hear.

By the time she rounded the corral, he was out of sight in the timber far above. Now she was feeling a keen disappointment. She wondered if she should go on to town, rejected the idea, half decided to wait for him on the porch. Then her curiosity got the best of her and she started up across the meadow.

She was riding into the trees when she heard a shot. She reined in quickly, suddenly afraid and strangely so. Another shot echoed down to her, then a third. And now she touched the roan with the spur, weaving up between the pines at a run.

She came within sight of the draw and saw Steve standing up near the head of it and the fear left her and she pulled the roan down to a walk. Abruptly, she saw Steve's arm lift and he tossed something into the air. Then his other hand streaked up and a shot blasted the stillness.

Curious rather than afraid now, she reined in and climbed aground. She was perhaps three hundred yards from Steve as he repeated what he'd done a moment ago, tossed something into the air and took a quick unaimed shot at it. This time she saw the object go kiting away as the bullet hit.

Over the next five minutes Norma Fitzhugh witnessed a thing she had a hard time believing. She watched Steve reload the gun, then thrust it through the belt of his waist-overalls. Then, deliberately, he would toss whatever it was—pine-cones, she guessed—into the air, draw and fire. He made four hits out of five.

Fascinated now, she watched him reload again, again thrust the gun through his belt. Now he took something bigger in his hand. When he tossed it, she saw that it was several of the same objects he had been throwing. When they were high in the air his hand blurred toward his belt so fast that her eye could scarcely follow the move. The gun flashed out and exploded in staccato bursts that sent a long roll of thunder down the draw. She saw at least three of those small arching dots jump from hits.

She didn't wait for more but led the roan back through the trees. When she came to the meadow, she skirted it rather than cross it openly; and she was in a hurry all the way to the cabin, thinking he might be returning any minute now.

Twenty minutes later, when Steve rode around the corner of the cabin, she was sitting on the porch, still awed by what she had seen.

He gave her a smile and touched the brim of his wide hat. "You're early, Norm. Been waiting long?" he asked innocently.

"Since nine."

He tried to look surprised. "Since nine?" Then he frowned, saying, "I've got to fix that danged clock." He

came down out of the saddle in a hurry and climbed the porch steps, going to the door and telling her, "Be with you in two minutes."

Inside, changing into the black suit that had always fit his heavy wide shoulders too snugly, he was thinking, *She took it in about the clock. Wonder what she thinks about what she saw?* Ten minutes ago, up in the timber, he had come across the tracks of her roan, knowing then that his plan so far was working the way he had hoped it would.

When he came out onto the porch again, he had the clock in his hand and showed it to her, asking, "How far off is it?"

"About half an hour slow," she said.

They talked of a lot of things on the way to town and he purposely avoided any mention of last night. It wasn't until Ledge lay below them and they were taking the trail down off the rim that she abruptly said, "Steve, you wouldn't tell me last night. But why is it you never carry a gun?"

He gave her a thoughtful glance, saying finally, "All right, Norm. Maybe you have the right to know."

He paused briefly before continuing. "Once I killed a man. He needed killing and the law agreed. Then one of his friends took it up where he left off. I only crippled him, on purpose. There were witnesses that backed me up on self-defense.

"After that, I got to thinkin'. This man had other friends. It looked like I'd have my hands full trying to persuade them. Sooner or later there'd be real trouble. So I left that country and came here. And decided never to go against a man with a loaded gun again."

Norma nodded and, after a few moments, asked, "Why did you say that I had a right to know, Steve?"

"Because you're to think the right things about me," came his humble answer.

"Others may be thinking the wrong things, Steve."

"The others don't matter."

Her glance came sharply around to him and when she saw that he meant it exactly as it sounded, her face took on color and in her confusion she lifted rein, sending the roan on ahead.

Presently she said softly, "Thank you for that, Steve," and there was a tenderness in her eyes that lifted a small excitement in him until he told himself it couldn't mean what he hoped it did.

Shortly, riding the street, they saw John Rice and Whit Ames and Joe White standing under the Emporium's awning and Norma said, "See you later," knowing Steve would want to be with them.

SHE WENT ON down along the rank of false-fronted buildings and found Mart Sanders and Ed Grimes, Mart's foreman, sitting on the hotel veranda. She tied at the hitchrail there and, as she came up the steps, both of them got up, Mart touching his hat.

He was a big man, a full head taller than Steve, she judged. Just now she was feeling strangely annoyed by his bigness and by what she read as a touch of arrogance in his smile.

"Mart, I'd like to see you alone," she said.

"Not now." His smile broadened. "Later, Norma."

"Why not now?" she asked, unable to keep anger from her tone.

"You went up Squaw with that bunch last night. If they're sickin' a woman on me in hopes it'll change my mind, I want Ed here to keep me from going soft."

She felt her face go hot as she said, "This is something personal, Mart."

"Then it can wait." He was still smiling.

Anger darkened the hazel of her eyes as she said, "Then Ed can hear this. Steve Cross was elected to speak

for the Bench at the meeting this morning. He'll try to talk some sense into you, Mart. My advice is that you let him."

"So Steve's gone in with 'em?" he said idly. He shrugged. "Okay, that's his hard luck. I was hoping nothing would happen to him."

"Steve can look out for himself, Mart."

He looked at Ed Grimes and winked. He looked down at Ed's lowslung gun, drawling. "Not the way I mean, he can't."

Anger crowded her beyond discretion now and, uncaring, she told him. "He can take care of himself that way, too."

"Y' don't say!" Mart Sanders laughed softly, mockingly.

"He never carries a gun because he's afraid to," she flared. "Because he's so good with one that he could shoot the buttons off your shirt before you could get a gun clear."

"So that's their line, is it?" Mart breathed, his smile fading.

Then, before she knew what was happening, he stepped around her, saying, "Come along, Ed."

On his way down the steps he nodded to two more of his men loafing on the walk. They went to their horses and only as Mart was swinging into the saddle did Norma have a premonition that made her call, "Wait, Mart!"

He looked across at her and slowly shook his head, saying, "This had to come sooner or later. It might as well be now."

She called to him once more. He didn't even turn his head and in another moment Ed Grimes rode in alongside him, the other pair following, and they went up the street.

They rode as far as the Emporium and were coming in



on the tie-rail there before Norma left the porch and started toward them.

"Now what? Looks like he's sore about something," Whit Ames muttered to the others as Mart Sanders swung in toward them.

Mart eased his big frame aground and ducked under the rail and stepped up onto the walk in front of them. His three men stayed in the saddle, lined up along the rack. "Now," Mart drawled at Steve, "I hear you're hell on wheels with a gun, Cross. Suppose you give us a sample."

He waited a moment, Steve didn't move. Then, deliberately, Mart reached in under his coat and pulled his .38 Colt's from shoulder-holster, holding it out to Steve. "Here, take it," he said. "Let it hang down at your side and try and lift it before Ed draws on you."

"No thanks," Steve said.

"Go on, take it," Mart insisted.

Steve only shook his head.

Mart sighed his disgust and then, putting the weapon back in the holster, he looked at John Rice. "Some ram-rod you picked," he drawled.

"You keep your tongue off us, Sanders!" Whit Ames bridled. "Otherwise, you'll—"

Mart's glance swiveled quickly to him, and he asked, "You'll what?"

Whit made no reply, and Mart turned and eyed Ed Grimes, saying, "Sounded like a threat to me, Ed."

"Sure did," Ed said.

Grimes reached down lazily and his hand came up holding a .45.

When his foreman was set, the gun steadied by his arm resting across his pommel, Mart Sanders said, "No one threatens me without something to back it up, Whit." His right arm struck out and he belted Whit across the face with an open palm.

The blow surprised Steve as much as it did the others. As Whit staggered back, clamping a hand to his already bleeding mouth, Steve said quietly, "Hold it, Sanders!"

Mart swung around on him. "Why should I? You heard him threaten me."

John Rice had witnessed all this with a cold rage building up in him. Seeing the blood run down Whit's chin drove the last ounce of caution out of him and now he began cursing Sanders, profanely and viciously.

Mart Sanders listened a moment; a gleam of satisfaction came to his eyes. Then, just as suddenly as he had struck Whit, he reached out and took a hold on John Rice's coat. Then he hit him full in the face, rocking the rancher's head around with one blow, tilting it back again with another. As he did this he smiled, no anger showing on his square face.

"Stay set, you two!" Grimes called to Steve and Joe White.

Mart Sanders shoved Rice away from him and the rancher stumbled into an awning post and fell to one knee. There was a moment when it looked like Joe White was going to lunge in at Sanders. But then Joe stepped back. Ed Grimes, seeing that, eased forward and leaned against the horn of the saddle, arms folded and the Colt's hanging loosely in his hand.

Steve hadn't moved. Now he said, "Mart, I wasn't sure about you. Now I am."

"Sure about what?"

"About how bad you need a lickin'."

"Know anyone who can give me one?"

Steve's glance went to Ed Grimes, whose face took on a down-lipped smile. Grimes still sat as he had a moment ago, lounging in the saddle, his weapon held carelessly.

"Maybe I do," Steve drawled.

As he spoke, his right hand lifted, stabbed in under his

coat and came out with the horn-handled .44. The move was so fast that Grimes, halfway understanding it, had only started to stiffen the wrist of his gun-hand. And now he froze, looking into the bore of Steve's Colt's, his own weapon still out of line.

Steve said, "Drop it."

It took Ed Grimes perhaps two seconds to make up his mind. Then the reaction from what he had just seen hit him and his face paled and he opened his fist, letting the gun fall into the dust.

"Joe, go pick it up," Steve said. As soon as Joe was off the walk, he added, "Just see that no one bothers us."

HE TURNED to Mart Sanders, catching only a trace of surprise and apprehension showing from behind the man's closely guarded expression. He stepped over and put the .44 against Sanders' stomach and reached under his coat, lifting the .38 from the shoulder holster.

He backed away and idly tossed it and his own weapon out toward the edge of the plank walk. Then, swinging lazily around on Sanders once more, he hit him full in the face.

All the weight of his heavy shoulders and swinging body was behind the blow. Mart had started lifting his hands, but that made no difference whatever. When his hands did come up they lifted all the way to his aching jaw, trying to press the pain away. An instant later Steve's second blow landed, breaking two fingers of Sanders' left hand and rocking his head far back.

Mart Sanders groaned and doubled over in pain, holding his broken hand with his good one across his stomach. Steve came in and lifted a knee hard into his face, straightening him. Then, viciously, Steve hit him twice more, crushing his lips and breaking his nose with an audible crunching of bone.

Sanders struck out wildly now, and an onlooker let out a whoop of delight that brought men running up along the walk and across from the opposite side. The heavy excitement of seeing a smaller man lick a bigger one swept the quickly-gathering crowd.

A roar echoed along the street as Steve tore his knuckles to the bone on Sanders' teeth and his left wrist ached like a molar with an exposed nerve from having hit Sanders at the jaw-hinge. But that blow decided it. Mart Sanders' eyes took on a blank look and afterwards he turned completely away from Steve and swung blindly at the empty air. The blood streaked his battered face and ran from his chin down across his white shirt front.

Blindly he staggered to the walk's edge and Steve let him go. He stumbled off the walk, fell into the hitch-rail and sprawled full length in the street.

The crowd closed on Steve then, whooping and half crazy, a dozen men trying to pound him on the back. Someone yelled, "To hell with the meetin' now!"

They let Steve go finally and he shouldered out of the crowd and saw Norma standing there. Her eyes were bright with that glad smile he so often thought about, and when Whit Ames came up to hand him his gun Steve was halfway sore at the interruption.

He pushed the gun through the belt of his trousers and went across to Norma, soberly telling her, "I should have been easier with him."

"You shouldn't, Steve!" she said. "Now it's settled. It's what he needed."

He nodded. "Like you said last night. Now he'll never get high-handed with you."

A momentary frown touched her face, then was gone. "No, he never will," she said. "He'll never have the chance, Steve."

His face went slack. "You aren't marryin' him, Norma?"

"I am not!"

A strange uneasiness took him and he reached down and dusted off his trousers. They didn't need it, for there wasn't a mark on him or his clothes and his coat wasn't even mussed. When he straightened, he couldn't help smiling. But when he saw the serious set of her face, his also went grave.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You said you'd never use a gun on a man, Steve," she told him. "Not that I minded."

"Did I say that?"

"Didn't you?"

"Think, Norm," he said.

Her look was puzzled. Then, stubbornly, she insisted, "Didn't you say you'd never go against a man with a gun again?"

"What kind of a gun did I say?"

She thought a moment. Then, "You said a loaded one."

He pulled his coat aside and drew the weapon and handed it to her. "That's what I said, Norm. Look it over."

She rocked open the loading gate, and half-cocking the Colt's, spun the cylinder.

It was empty.

*Gold can drive a man sane, too*

## FOR SALE, THE GOLDEN QUEEN

HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS

THIS is the story of the great Golden Queen deal, as Hy Smith told it, after recovering his sanity:

Aggy and me were snug up against it. One undeserved misfortune after another had come along and swatted us, till it looked as though we'd have to work for a living. But we plugged along at the Golden Queen, taking out about thirty cents a day—coarse gold, fortunately—and at last we had 'bout an ounce and a half. Then says Aggy:

"We could sell this mine, Hy, if we only put our profits in the right place."

"Yes," says I. "This is a likely outfit around here to stick a gravel-bank on, ain't it? Good old Alder Gulch people, and folks from down Arizony way, and the like of that! Suppose you tried it on Uncle Peters, for instance—d'ye know what he'd say? Well, this 'ud be about the size of it: 'Unh, unh! Oh, man! Oh, dear me! That ain't no way to salt a mine, Ag! No, no! You'd oughter done this, and that—that's the way we used to do in Californy—nice weather, ain't it? No, thanks—I don't care to buy no placer mines—lots of country left yet for the taking up of it—it's a mighty good mine, I admit—you'd better keep it.' That's what he'd say."

Ag combed his whiskers with his fingers. "I don't think we could close out to Uncle Peters," says he.

"And if you tried some of the rest of 'em, they'd walk

on your frame for insulting their intelligence. Perhaps you was thinking of inviting Pioche Bill Williams up to take a look at the ground?"

"Well, no," says Aggy, slowly. "I don't think I'd care to irritate Bill—he's mighty careless with firearms."

"I should remark, I ain't a cautious man myself in some ways, and I've met a stack of fellers that was real liberal in their idees, but for a man that takes no kind of interest in what comes afterward, give me Pioche Bill. Oh, no, Aggy, we don't sell any placer mines in these parts."

"I tell you what," says Ag. "Let's go up to town. Stands to reason there must be a mut or two up there—somebody just dying to go out and haul wealth out of the soil."

"We're a good advertisement for the business. We look horrible prosperous, don't we?" says I.

The main deck of Ag's pants was made of a flour sack. I had a pretty decent pair, but my coat was one-half horse blanket and the other half odds and ends. Ag had a long-tailed coat he used to wear when he was doing civil engineering jobs.

"We could fix one man out fairly well," says he.

"Yes; and the other would look like the losing side of a scarecrow revolution."

"Wait a minute," says he, "I'm thinking." So he sat and twisted his whiskers and whistled through his teeth.

"I've got it!" says he. "The whole business right down to the dot! Darned if it ain't the best scheme I ever lit on! Here's what happened to us: We're two honest prospectors that have been gophering around this country for years, never touching a color, grub running low, and—well, there ain't any use bothering with that part now. I can think it up when the time comes. Here's the cream of the plant. We've had such a darn hard time of it that when at last, under the extraordinary circumstances

which I have recounted before, we light on the almost undiluted gold of the Golden Queen, your mind is so weakened that you can't stand the strain of prosperity. You're haunted with delusions that you're still a poor man, and I can't keep any decent clothes on you—fast as I buy 'em you tear 'em up. Now I'm willing to sell the Golden Queen for the merely nominal sum of—what shall we strike 'em for? Five hundred? For five hundred dollars, then, so I can get out of this country to some place where my poor pardner will receive good medical treatment."

"And I'm the goat?" says I. "Well, I expected that. But do you expect anybody's going to swallow that guff? It's good. Ag, it would do fine in a newspaper, but can you find a man to trade five hundred hard iron dollars for it?"

Aggy drew himself up mighty proud. "I'll tell you what I've done in my day," says he, "I've made an intelligent man believe that the first story I told him wasn't so. Can you beat it?"

"I know you, Ag," says I. Then we had to slide down and see if we could get a small loan off Uncle Peters, for we didn't have enough dust to finance salting our sand-bank and pay for a trip to town, too. Ag would have it that we must do our turn for the old man. "It'll amuse him," says he, "and he's more likely to come forward." Truth of the matter was, when Aggy got one of his fine ideas, he had to let the neighborhood in.

Well, sir, Uncle Peters was that pleased he forked over a cartridgeful without weighing it. My play was to look melancholy, and tear a slit in my clothes once in a while. I had to just make believe that part when we was rehearsing for the old man, as there wasn't enough material to be extravagant with.

So up to town we goes, and if you ever see a picture of hard luck on two feet, it was me.



"I'm going to strike for a gambling joint," says Ag. "You take a tin-horn gam, and he knows everything, and that's just the kind of man I'm looking for."

So when we hit town, Ag sails into the Palace Dance Emporium, where they had the games running in the middle of the place between the lunch counter and the bar. He had nerve, had Agamemnon G. Jones.

"Hy," says he, "you'll have to watch the play a little. Mebbe you'd ought to change some, just as it happens. I'll have to do my lying according to the way the circumstances fall, so keep your eye peeled, and whatever you do, do it from the bottom of your heart. I can fix it so long as you don't queer me by shacking along too easy."

So saying he fixes the new necktie he'd bought down at the corner, tilts the new hat a little, and braces ahead. He could look more dressed up on 20 cents' worth of new clothes than some men could with a whole store behind 'em.

When we got into the place the folks gazed at us. Aggy was leading me by the hand.

"There," says he, very gentle. "Now sit down, and I'll tell you a story by and by."

I tore a hole in the coat, and mumbled to myself, and sat down according to directions.

Then Aggy walks up to where the studpoker game was blooming.

"Gentlemen," says he, making them a bow, "I trust it won't inconvenience you any to have my poor unfortunate pardner in your midst for awhile? I can't desert him, and I do like to play a little cards now and then."

"What's the matter with him?" asks the dealer.

Ag taps his head.

"Violent?" asks the dealer.

Now, Ag didn't know just how he wanted to have it, so he didn't commit himself to nothing.

"Oh, I can always handle him," says he.

"Well, come right in," says the dealer. "They're only a dollar a stack."

"Well," says Ag, "I'll just invest in \$10 worth to pass away the time—you take dust, don't you?"

"I used to say I wouldn't take anybody's dust," says the dealer, being funny with such a good customer, "but since I've struck this country I've found I've gotter."

Ag pulls out the old buckskin sack, that would hold enough to support quite a family through the winter. It was stuffed with gravel stones.

"Oh, here!" says he, whilst he was fumbling with the strings. "No use to open that—I've got another package—what you might call small change." Then he digs up Uncle Peter's cartridge shell.

I want to tell you I had my own troubles keeping my face together while Ag was doing his work. You never see any such good-natured, old-fashioned patriarch as he was. When they beat him out of a hand he'd laugh fit to kill himself.

"You're welcome, boys!" he'd say. "There's plenty more of it."

At the same time, you wouldn't live high on all you could make out of Aggy on a studpoker game. He was playing 'em right down to cases, yet the way he talked, he seemed like the most liberal cuss that ever threw good money away. Of course, they had to ask him about his pardner and the rest of it whilst the cards were being shuffled, and a few inquiring remarks drew the whole sad story out of Ag.

"It's mighty tough," says he, "Hy's a fine-looking feller, when he's dressed decent; but the sight of new clothes on himself makes him furious; he foams and rips till he's tore them to gun-wadding."

"Where did you say this here claim of yours was?" asks the dealer.

"Up on Silver Creek—just below Murphy's butte," answers Ag politely.

Then that dealer put in a lot of foxy questions making poor, innocent, unsuspecting Aggy give himself dead away. He told how there wasn't time to look for a buyer that would pay the proper price and he wouldn't know where to look anyhow, so he'd have to take the first man that offered, even if he didn't get no more than five hundred for the claim.

The dealer breathed hard and fairly shuffled the spots off the cards.

"Now," says he, "I sympathize with you—I understand just how you feel about your pardner. I'm the same kind of man myself, that way. If I had a pardner in difficulties, I wouldn't mind what I lost on it so long's I could fix him up."

Here's where I nearly choked to death, for if any man could get the price of a meal off that tinhorn, without sitting on his chest and feeding him the end of a six-shooter, his face was one of the meanest tricks a deserving man ever had sprung on him.

"So if I was you," continued the dealer, "I'd get him out of this country quick, and as for your claim, why, I don't mind if I held you out on that myself," says he. "I don't want no mines; I wouldn't bother with it, only I see you're a good, kind-hearted man, and it's my motto that such people ought to be encouraged. Now, what do you say we start for a look at the territory this afternoon? Nothing like doing things up while you are at it." Aggy kind of scratched his head as if this hurry surprised him. "I didn't just think of letting it go so sudden," said he. "You know I'm kind of attached to the place."

"That's all foolishness," says the dealer. "Your poor pardner there wants attention—you can see that—and I don't believe you're the sort of man to let him go on suffering when there ain't no need of it."

"No," says Aggy, thoughtfully, "that's so."

"And would you mind," says the dealer, his hand fairly trembling to get hold of it, "just letting me have a squint at that gunnysack full of dust you have in your clothes?" I didn't require any hint from Ag that it was my place to be violent. With one loud holler I landed on my ear on the floor and kicked the poker table on top of the dealer. More'n a half-dozen men hopped on to me, and we had it for fair all over the place. I gave 'em the worth of their time before they got me in the corner.

"Whew!" says Aggy, wiping his brow, "this is the worst attack he's had yet."

"Just what I was telling you," says the dealer, very confidential and earnest. "You want to get him away from here quick—I've had some experience in those kinds of cases, and when I see your friend's face, I knew you wanted to get a move on."

"It's dreadful, ain't it?" says Ag. "I believe you're in the right about it—but, say, I feel that I'd ought to pay for the lamp he busted."

"Not at all," says the dealer, as generous as could be: "Not at all! That's an accident might have happened to any gentleman. Now, I'll just take a friend along, and we'll sail right out to your place. Can you drive there?"

"Oh, yes!" said Aggy. "The roads ain't anything extra, but you can make it all right."

So away goes the four of us that afternoon. Ag and me, we felt leary of the fourth man at first. He let on to be considerable of a miner, but after a bit we sized him up.

"Did you ever," says Aggy whilst they was talking this and that about mines, "did you ever run your pay dirt through a ground-sluice rocker that was fitted up with double amalgam plates, top and bottom, and had the apron sewed on to a puddle board that slanted up, instead of down?"

"Why, sure!" says that feller, judging from Aggy's tone

of voice that this was the proper thing to do. "We didn't use to handle our dirt no other way out in Uckle-Chuckle county."

"Is that so?" cries Aggy, very much surprised. "Well, do you know that very few people do?"

"It makes me tired," answers the man in a knowing way, "to think of the way some folks mines. Now that you've called my attention to it, I don't recollect that I've heard of anybody using a ground-sluice rocker the way you speak of, since I left old Uckle-Chuckle county." And here I got a little violent again, because I can't conceal my feelings as well as Ag. I had to have several attacks on the way out when Ag was brought to close quarters, but we did pretty well on the trip.

"Well, gentlemen, there's the Golden Queen!" says Aggy when we turned the bend in the creek. "Seems funny that such an uninteresting-looking heap of rocks and stuff as that should be a gold mine, don't it?"

He sees by their faces that they was a little disappointed and that he'd better get in his crack first. Then the question come up of how we was to get them fellers to dig where we wanted 'em to without letting 'em see we wanted 'em to. But, Ag, he was able for it.

"Gentlemen," says he, "just stick your pick in anywheres—one place is just as good as another. (That was the gospel truth.) But if you don't know just where to start suppose we try an old miner's trick, that Mr. Johnson there, I make no doubt, has done a hundred times."

Johnson, he smiled hearty. "Yes, yes! That old game!" says he. "I'd nearly forgot all about it—let's see—how is it you do it?"

"First you throw up a rock," says Ag.

"Oh, now I remember! Sure!" says Johnson. "You throw up a rock——" He stopped, smiling feeble and uncertain, waiting to hear the rest of it.

"Suppose we let Mr. Daggett (that was the tinhorn) do

the throwing?" says Aggy. "He's a new chum, and we fellers always feel they have the luck. You may think this is all foolish superstition," says he, turning to the gambler, "but I tell you, honest, there's a good deal in it," and that was the second true thing Ag said that day.

Daggett, he threw up the rock.

"Now, go and stand over it," says Ag. Daggett goes over according, but he ain't pointed in the right direction.

"Now, you turn around three times."

But after he done it we weren't no better off than before, for the chump landed just as he had started.

Ag surveyed the ground.

"Now, you walk backward three steps, then four to the left, then back five more—ain't that it?" turning to Johnson.

"That's it!" says Johnson, slapping his leg. "That's her! The same old game! Lord! how it all comes back to a feller!"

"And just where you land, you dig," finished Ag, handing Daggett's pick.

Daggett sinks the pick to the eye the first crack.

"Gosh!" says he. "Seems kind of soft here!"

"Is that so?" cried Aggy, highly excited. "Then you've struck gold for sure!" Having put it there himself he felt reasonably certain about it.

Well, they scraped up the bedrock, and Aggy offered to let Johnson pan it, but Johnson said he'd had to quit mining because his hands got so sore swinging a pan, so Daggett he kind of scrambled the dirt out after a fashion, and there at the bottom was our ounce and a half of gold! Well, I want to tell you there was some movement around there. We weren't in the same fix of a friend of mine who loaded a pan for a tenderfoot with four solid ounces, and when he slid the water around on that nice

little yellor new moon in the corner of the pan, "Humph!" says the tenderfoot, "don't you get any more gold than that out of so much dirt?"

Four ounces to the pan only means about a hundred thousand dollars a day income.

"Gooramighty!" says my friend, plumb disgusted. "I'd have had to borrow all the dust there is on the creek to satisfy you—did you think it was all gold?"

It broke my heart to see the way that man Daggett washed the fine gold into the creek, but he was familiar enough with handling the dust to know that an ounce was good money, even if it did look small. He turned pale, and begun to dig for dear life. There was no prying him loose. Well, that's a point Aggy hadn't counted on. He managed to slide over near me.

"For heaven's sake, Hy!" he whispers, "fly down to Uncle Peters' and get some more dust or we're ruined! I'll put it in the pan somehow, if you'll only get it here! Hold the old man up if you have to—but get that dust!"

I begun to holler very melancholy, and prance around. By and by I pulled my freight loose and careless down creek.

"Say!" says Johnson, "there goes your friend, Mr. Jones! Shall I ketch him?"

"Oh, no," says Aggy. "Let him alone—he's used to it around here—he'll be back right away again."

When I got out of sight I humped for Uncle Peters.

"Sure!" says the old man, when I told him our troubles. "Take the whole blasted clean-up, Hy. We honest men has got to stand by each and one another—don't let that rascally tinhorn escape."

So I grabbed Uncle Peters' hard-earned savings and hustled back again.

As soon as I got in good view of the outfit, I knew something was wrong, by the look of Ag's face; but what

it was got me, for there was both them fellers in the hole now, digging dirt like all possessed. Daggett had busted his suspenders, and the other lad's coat was ripped up the back; but they didn't care; they were mauling the fair face of nature like genuine lunatics, and cussing and swearing in their hurry.

"Well, what's the matter with Ag?" thinks I. "Them fellers ain't got on yet, that's certain," but he looked as if he'd swallowed a stroke of lightning the wrong way. Never see a man—particular a man with Aggy's nerve—look so much like two cents on the dollar. I didn't have to be cautious in my approach; our friends were too busy to notice me.

"What the devil's loose, Ag?" says I.

"Oh, nothing!" says he. "Nothing much! They're taking it out by the hatful, that's all. Look!"

I looked, and sure enough! There was the pan with a small-sized shovelful of yaller-boys in it—pieces that would weigh up to \$10 some of them. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Where'd they get it?" says I.

"Out of the claim," says Aggy.

I nearly fell dead. "Out of the claim!" I yelled in a whisper. "Go on! Your whiskers are growing in!"

"Straight goods," says Ag, "and I had to stand here and see them do it! The Golden Queen is all my fancy painted her. The second pass that ice-pick-faced mutt made he brought up a chunk as big as a biscuit. 'Is that gold?' says he. 'Oh, yes!' says I. 'That's gold!' The truth come out of me before I thought—it knocked me to see that chunk. First time I ever made such a break—well—well. Why didn't it occur to me to try the taste of that piece of ground before I put in my flavoring? I was so d—d sure there wasn't \$13 worth of metal in the whole twenty acres! Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! To sprinkle a pocket



that's near half gold with a little old pinch of dust, is one of them ridiculous and extravagant excesses my friend Shakespeare mentions! If there was a lily around here, I'd paint it, so's to go the whole hog."

"What in the name of all the Mormon gods are we going to do?" says I.

"Leave me think," he answers. And again he pulls his whiskers and whistles through his teeth.

There came a horrible yell from the hole. Daggett held up what seemed like a yaller potato. "Hooray!" says he. "Ain't that a humming bird?"

"You want to think quick," says I. "I feel something like murder rising in my veins."

"By gosh!" says Ag, snapping his fingers. "I've got her! Come to, you son-of-a-gun. Come to!"

"How's that?" I asked, not just tumbling exactly.

"Come to!" says Ag. "Regain your scattered intelligence! How in blazes can I sell, then, without your consent?"

"Right you are! I'm off!" says I. And with that I cut loose.

"Help!" howls Aggy. "help!"

The two fellers were too busy to want to stop, but after I sent a brace of rocks in their direction, they concluded it might be as well to quiet me first. Lord! How I did carry on! I gave Ag the wink and pulled for the creek, and it was not long before, with Aggy's help, in we all three went, kersock.

They pulled me out and laid me on the bank, insensible.

"He's dead, I reckon," says Daggett.

"No," says Aggy. "I can feel his pulse beat, but it does seem to me there's a different look in his face somehow."

Then I opened my eyes.

"Why, Agamemnon," says I, "what am I doing here?"

"Hush!" says he, "you ain't been well."

"Dear me! You don't say!" And I rubbed my forehead with my hand.

"But I feel all right now—have I been this way long?"

"Nigh on to six months, Hy, old horse; ever since we hit it so rich on our claim—don't you remember about that?"

"Certainly," says I. "It seems like yesterday; it's as clear—but who are these people?"

Ag let on to be very much embarrassed. "Well," says he, "why—hunh—why—to tell you the truth, I thought I ought to get you out of the country, to where you could see an expensive doctor, and these are some folks I brought down to buy the claim—you being sick, you know!"

"Buy the claim!" I hollers, jumping up. "Buy the claim? What's this you're giving me? After all my toils and hardships and one thing and another, to sell the Golden Queen? Well, I want you to understand that nobody buys this claim, except across my dead body," says I.

Aggy, he looks completely dumbfounded. "My! This puts me in an awkward fix," he says. "Gentlemen, you see how I'm up against it? I can't sell without my partner's consent, now he's in his right mind; and, as far as that goes, the only reason I wanted to sell is removed. The dicker's off, that's the long and short of it.

Oh, how pleased that tinhorn looked! He swallowed three times and got red in the face before he answered a word.

"This may be all right, but it looks mighty queer to me," he growls.

"The ways of Providence is past understanding," says Aggy, taking off his hat. "To our poor human minds it does seem queer, no doubt. Now, Mr. Daggett," he continued, waving his arm in that broad-minded style he

had, "I'm sorry things has come out this way for your sake, although a man that has such a sympathizing nature as you will soon forget his own disappointment in the general joy that envelopes this camp. And to show you there's nothing small about me, you can have any of those chunks you dug out this afternoon that don't weigh over two dollars."

Daggett sent the chunk to a place where it would melt quick, and expressed a hope we'd follow it. With that he hopped into his go-cart and pulled for town, larruping the poor horse sinful. We had the pleasure of seeing the animile turn the outfit into the gully in return for the compliment. They scrambled in again and disappeared from view. Then Aggy reached out his hand to me.

"Don't tell me nothing but the plain truth, old man," says he, "I can't bear nothing except the plainest kind of truth, but on your sacred word of honor, ain't your uncle Ag a corker?"

"Aggy," says I, "I ain't up to the occasion. There ain't a man on earth could do credit to your qualities but yourself."

Then we shook hands mighty hearty.

*The Blackfeet, cruelest of them all . . .*

## MOUNTAIN MEDICINE

A. B. GUTHRIE, JR.

THE MIST along the creek shone in the morning sun, which was coming up lazy and half-hearted, as if of a mind to turn back and let the spring season wait. The cottonwoods and quaking aspens were still bare and the

needles of the pines old and dark with winter, but beaver were prime and beaver were plenty. John Clell made a lift and took the drowned animal quietly from the trap and stretched it in the dugout with three others.

Bill Potter said, "If 'tweren't for the Injuns! Or if 'tweren't for you and your notions!" For all his bluster, he still spoke soft, as if on the chance that there were other ears to hear.

Clell didn't answer. He reset the trap and pulled from the mud the twig that slanted over it, and unstoppered his goat-horn medicine bottle, dipped the twig in it and poked it back into the mud.

"Damn if I don't think sometimes you're scary," Potter went on, studying Clell out of eyes that were small and set close. "What kind of medicine is it makes you smell Injuns with nary one about?"

"Time you see as many of them as I have, you'll be scary too," Clell answered, slipping his paddle into the stream. He had a notion to get this greenhorn told off, but he let it slide. What was the use? You couldn't put into a greenhorn's head what it was you felt. You couldn't give him the feel of distances and sky-high mountains and lonely winds and ideas spoken out of nowhere, ideas spoken into the head by medicines a man couldn't put a name to. Like now. Like here. Like this idea that there was brown skin about, and Blackfoot skin at that.

"I seen Blackfeet enough for both of us," he added. His mind ran back to Lewis and Clark and a time that seemed long ago because so much had come between; to days and nights and seasons of watching out, with just himself and the long silence for company; to last year and a hole that lay across the mountains to the south, where the Blackfeet and Crows had fought, and he had sided with the Crows and got a wound in the leg that hurt sometimes yet. He could still see some of the

Blackfeet faces. He would know them, and they would know him, being long-remembering.

He knew Blackfeet all right, but he couldn't tell Bill Potter why he thought some of them were close by. There wasn't any sign he could point to; the creek sang along and the breeze played in the trees, and overhead a big eagle was gliding low, and nowhere was there a foot-print or a movement or a whiff of smoke. It was just a feeling he had, and Potter wouldn't understand it, but would only look at him and maybe smile with one side of his mouth.

"Ain't anybody I knows of carries a two-shoot gun but you," Potter said, still talking as if Clell was scared over nothing.

Clell looked down at it, where he had it angled to his hand. It had two barrels, fixed on a swivel. When the top one was fired, you slipped a catch and turned the other up. One barrel was rifled, the other bigger and smoothbored, and sometimes he loaded the big one with shot, for birds, and sometimes with a heavy ball, for bear or buffalo, or maybe with ball and buck both, just for what-the-hell. There was shot in it this morning, for he had thought maybe to take ducks or geese, and so refresh his taste for buffalo meat. The rifle shone in the morning sun. It was a nice piece, with a patch box a man wouldn't know to open until someone showed him the place to press his thumb. For no reason at all, Clell called his rifle Mule Ear.

He said, "You're a fool, Potter, more ways than one. Injuns'll raise your hair for sure, if it don't so happen I do it myself. As for this here two-shooter, I like it, and that's that."

Bill Potter always took low when a man dared him like that. Now all he said was "It's heavy as all hell."

Slipping along the stream, with the banks rising steep

on both sides, Clell thought about beaver and Indians and all the country he had seen—high country, pretty as paint, wild as any animal and lonesome as time, and rivers unseen but by him, and holes and creeks without a name, and one place where water spouted hot and steaming and sometimes stinking from the earth, and another where a big spring flowed with pure tar; and no one believed him when he told of them, but called him the biggest liar yet. It was all right, though. He knew what he knew, and kept it to himself now, being tired of queer looks and smiles and words that made out he was half crazy.

Sometimes, remembering things, he didn't see what people did or hear what they said or think to speak when spoken to. It was all right. It didn't matter what was said about his sayings or his doings or his ways of thinking. A man long alone where no other white foot ever had stepped got different. He came to know what the Indians meant by medicine. He got to feeling like one with the mountains and the great sky and the lonesome winds and the animals and Indians, too, and it was a little as if he knew what they knew, a little as if there couldn't be a secret but was whispered to him, like the secret he kept hearing now.

"Let's cache," he said to Potter. The mist was gone from the river and the sun well up and decided on its course. It was time, and past time, to slide back to their hidden camp.

"Just got one more trap to lift," Potter argued.

"All right, then."

Overhead the eagle still soared close. Clell heard its long, high cry.

He heard something else, too, a muffled pounding of feet on the banks above. "Injuns!" he said, and bent the canoe into the cover of an overhanging bush. "I told you."

Potter listened. "Buffalo is all. Buffalo trampin' around."

Clell couldn't be sure, except for the feeling in him. Down in this little canyon a man couldn't see to the banks above. It could be buffalo, all right, but something kept warning, "Injuns! Injuns!"

Potter said, "Let's git on. Can't be cachin' from every little noise. Even sparrers make noise."

"Wait a spell."

"Scary." Potter said just the one word, and he said it under his breath, but it was enough. Clell dipped his paddle. One day he would whip Potter, but right now he reckoned he had to go on.

It wasn't fear that came on him a shake later, but just the quick knowing he had been right all along, just the holding still, the waiting, the watching what to do, for the banks had broken out with Indians—Indians with feathers in their hair, and bows and war clubs and spears in their hands; Indians yelling and motioning and scrambling down to the shores on both sides and fitting arrows to their bow strings.

Potter's face had gone white and tight like rawhide drying. He grabbed at his rifle.

Clell said, "Steady!" and got the pipe that hung from around his neck and held it up, meaning he meant peace.

These were the Blackfeet sure enough. These were the meanest Indians living. He would know them from the Rees and Crows and Pierced Noses and any other. He would know them by their round heads and bent noses and their red-and-green leather shields and the moccasins mismatched in color, and their bows and robes not fancy, and no man naked in the bunch.

The Indians waved them in. Clell let go his pipe and stroked with his paddle. Potter's voice was shrill. "You fool! You gonna let 'em torment us to death?"

That was the way with a mouthy greenhorn—full of

himself at first, and then wild and shaken. "Steady!" Clell said again. "I aim to pull to shore. Don't point that there rifle 'less you want a skinful of arrows."

There wasn't a gun among the Indians, not a decent gun, but only a few rusty trade muskets. They had battleaxes, and bows taken from their cases, ready for business, and some had spears, and all looked itching for a white man's hair. They waited, their eyes bright as buttons, their faces and bare forearms and right shoulders shining brown in the sun. Only men were at the shore line, but Clell could see the faces of squaws and young ones looking down from the bank above.

An Indian splashed out and got hold of the prow of the canoe and pulled it in. Clell stepped ashore, holding up his pipe. He had to watch Potter. Potter stumbled out, his little eyes wide and his face white, and fear showing even for an Indian to see. When he stepped on the bank, one of the Indians grabbed his rifle and wrenched it from him, and Potter just stood like a scared rabbit, looking as if he might jump back in the dugout any minute.

Clell reached out and took a quick hold on the rifle and jerked it away and handed it back to Potter. There was a way to treat Indians. Act like a squaw and they treated you bad; act like a brave man and you might have a chance.

Potter snatched the gun and spun around and leaped. The force of the jump carried the canoe out. He made a splash with the paddle. An arrow whispered in the air and made a little thump when it hit. Clell saw the end of it, shaking high in Potter's back.

Potter cried out, "I'm hit! I'm hit, Clell!"

"Come back! Easy! Can't get away!"

Instead, Potter swung around with the rifle. There were two sounds, the crack of the powder and the gunshot plunk of a ball. Clell caught a glimpse of an Indian



going down, and then the air was full of the twang of bow strings and the whispered flight of arrows, and Potter slumped slowly back in the canoe, his body stuck like a pincushion. An Indian splashed out to take the scalp. Two others carried the shot warrior up the bank. Already a squaw was beginning to keen.

Clell stood quiet as a stump, letting only his eyes move. It was so close now that his life was as good as gone. He could see it in the eyes around him, in the hungry faces, in the hands moving and the spears and the bows being raised. He stood straight, looking their eyes down, thinking the first arrow would come any time now, from any place, and then he heard the eagle scream. Its shadow lazied along the ground. His thumb slipped the barrel catch, his wrist twisted under side up. He shot without knowing he aimed. Two feathers puffed out of the bird. It went into a steep climb and faltered and turned head down and spun to the ground, making a thump when it hit.

The Indians' eyes switched back to him. Their mouths fell open, and slowly their hands came over the mouth holes in the sign of surprise. It was as he figured in that flash between life and death. They thought all guns fired a single ball. They thought he was big medicine as a marksman. One of them stepped out and laid his hand on Mule Ear, as if to draw some of its greatness into himself. A murmur started up, growing into an argument. They ordered Clell up the bank. When he got there, he saw one Indian high-tailing it for the eagle, and others following, so's to have plumes for their war bonnets, maybe, or to eat the raw flesh for the medicine it would give them.

There was a passel of Indians on the banks, three or four hundred, and more coming across from the other side. The man Clell took for the chief had mixed red

earth with spit and dabbed it on his face. He carried a bird-wing fan in one hand and wore a half-sleeved hunting shirt made of bighorn skin and decorated with colored porcupine quills. His hair was a wild bush over his eyes and ears. At the back of it he had a tuft of owl feathers hanging. He yelled something and motioned with his hands, and the others began drifting back from the bank, except for a couple of dozen that Clell figured were head men. Mostly, they wore leggings and moccasins, and leather shirts or robes slung over the left shoulder. A few had scarlet trade blankets, which had come from God knew where. One didn't wear anything under his robe.

The squaws and the little squaws in their leather sacks of dresses, the naked boys with their potbellies and swollen navels, and the untried and middling warriors were all back now. The chief and the rest squatted down in a half circle, with Clell standing in front of them. They passed a pipe around. After a while they began to talk. He had some of the hang of Blackfoot, and he knew, even without their words, they were arguing what to do with him. One of them got up and came over and brought his face close to Clell's. His eyes picked at Clell's head and eyes and nose and mouth. Clell could smell grease on him and wood smoke and old sweat, but what came to his mind above all was that here was a man he had fought last season while siding with the Crows. He looked steadily into the black eyes and saw the knowing come into them, too, and watched the man turn back and take his place in the half circle and heard him telling what he knew.

They grunted like hogs, the Blackfeet did, like hogs about to be fed, while the one talked and pointed, arguing that here was a friend of their old enemies, the Crows. The man rubbed one palm over the others, saying in sign that Clell had to be rubbed out. Let them stand

him up and use him for a target, the man said. The others said yes to that, not nodding their heads as white men would, but bowing forward and back from the waist.

Clell had just one trick left. He stepped over and showed his gun and pointed to the patch box and, waving one hand to catch their eyes, he sprang the cover with the other thumb. He closed the cover and handed the gun to the chief.

The chief's hands were red with the paint he had smeared on his face. Clell watched the long thumbnail, hooked like a bird claw, digging at the cover, watched the red fingers feeling for a latch or spring. While the others stretched their necks to see, the chief turned Mule Ear over, prying at it with his eyes. It wasn't any use. Unless he knew the hidden spot to press, he couldn't spring the lid. Clell took the piece back, opened the patch box again, closed it and sat down.

He couldn't make more medicine. He didn't have a glass to bring the sun down, and so to light a pipe, or even a trader's paper-backed mirror for the chief to see how pretty he was. All he had was the shot at the eagle and the patch box on Mule Ear, and he had used them both and had to take what came.

Maybe it was the eagle that did it, or the hidden cover, or maybe it was just the crazy way of Indians. The chief got up, and with his hands and with his tongue asked if the white hunter was a good runner.

Clell took his time in answering, as a man did when making high palaver. He lighted his pipe. He said, "The white hunter is a bad runner. The other Long Knives thinks he runs fast. Their legs are round from sitting on a horse. They cannot run."

The chief grunted, letting the sign talk and the slow words sink into him. "The Long Knife will run." He pointed to the south, away from the creek. "He will run

for the trading house that the whiteface keeps among the Crows. He will go as far three arrows will shoot, and then he will run. My brothers will run. If my brothers run faster—" The chief brought his hand to his scalp lock.

The other Indians had gathered around, even the squaws and the young ones. They were grunting with excitement. The chief took Mule Ear. Other hands stripped off Clell's hunting shirt, the red-checked woolen shirt underneath, his leggings, his moccasins, his small clothes, until he stood white and naked in the sun, and the squaws and young ones came up close to see what white flesh looked like. The squaws made little noises in their throats. They poked at his bare hide. One of them grabbed the red-checked shirt from the hands of a man and ran off with it. The chief made the sign for "Go!"

Clell walked straight, quartering into the sun. He walked slow and solemn, like going to church. If he hurried, they would start the chase right off. If he lazed along, making out they could be damned for all he cared, they might give him more of a start.

He was two hundred yards away when the first whoop sounded, the first single whoop, and then all the voices yelling and making one great whoop. From the corner of his eye he saw their legs driving, saw the uncovered brown skins, the feathered hair, the bows and spears, and then he was running himself, seeing ahead of him the far tumble and roll of high plains and hills, with buffalo dotting the distances and a herd of prairie goats sliding like summer mist, and everywhere, so that, not always could his feet miss them, the angry knobs of cactus. South and east, many a long camp away where the Bighorn joined the Roche Jaune, lay Lisa's Fort, the trading house among the Crows.

He ran so as to save himself for running, striding long

and loose through the new-sprouting buffalo grass, around the cactus, around the pieces of sandstone where snakes were likely to lie. He made himself breathe easy, breathe deep, breathe full in his belly. Far off in his feelings he felt the cactus sting him and the spines pull off to sting again. The sun looked him in the face. It lay long and warm on the world. At the sky line the heat sent up a little shimmer. There wasn't a noise anywhere except the thump of his feet and his heart working in his chest and his breath sucking in and out and, behind him, a cry now and then from the Indians, seeming not closer or farther away than at first. He couldn't slow himself with a look. He began to sweat.

A man could run a mile, or two or three, and then his breath wheezed in him. It grew into a hard snore in the throat. The air came in, weak and dry, and burned his pipes and went out in one spent rush while his lungs sucked for more. He felt as if he had been running on forever. He felt strange and out of the world, a man running in a dream, except that the ache in his throat was real and the fire of cactus in his feet. The earth spread away forever, and he wast lost in it and friendless, and not a proper part of it any more; and it served him right. When a man didn't pay any mind to his medicine, but went ahead regardless, as he had done, his medicine played out on him.

Clell looked back. He had gained, fifty yards, seventy-five, a half a musket shot; he had gained on all the Indians except one, and that one ran as swift and high-headed as a prairie goat. He was close and coming closer.

Clell had a quick notion to stop and fight. He had an idea he might dodge the spear the Indian carried and come to grips with him. But the rest would be on him before he finished. It took time to kill a man just with the hands alone. Now was the time for the running he

had saved himself for. There was strength in his legs yet. He made them reach out, farther, faster, faster, farther. The pound of them came to be a sick jolting inside his skull. His whole chest fought for air through the hot, closed tunnel of his throat. His legs weren't a part of him; they were something to think about, but not to feel, something to watch and to wonder at. He saw them come out and go under him and come out again. He saw them weakening, the knees bending in a little as the weight came on them. He felt wetness on his face, and reached up and found his nose was streaming blood.

He looked over his shoulder again. The main body of Indians had fallen farther back, but the prairie goat had gained. Through a fog he saw the man's face, the chin set high and hard, the black eyes gleaming. He heard the moccasins slapping in the grass.

Of a sudden, Clell made up his mind. Keep on running and he'd get a spear in the back. Let it come from the front. Let it come through the chest. Let him face up to death like a natural man and to hell with it. His feet jolted him to a halt. He swung around and threw up his hands as if to stop a brute.

The Indian wasn't ready for that. He tried to pull up quick. He made to lift his spear. And then he stumbled and fell ahead. The spear handle broke as the point dug in the ground. Clell grabbed at the shaft, wrenched the point from the earth and drove it through the man. The Indian bucked to his hands and knees and strained and sank back. It was as easy as that.

Bending over him, Clell let his chest drink, let his numb legs rest, until he heard the yells of the Indians and, looking up, saw them strung out in a long file, with the closest of them so close he could see the set of their faces. He turned and ran again, hearing a sudden, louder howling as the Indians came on the dead one, and then

the howling dying again to single cries as they picked up the chase. They were too many for him, and too close. He didn't have a chance. He couldn't fort up and try to stand them off, not with his hands bare. There wasn't any place to hide. He should have listened to his medicine when it was talking to him back there on the creek.

Down the slope ahead of him a river ran—the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri, he thought, while he made his legs drive him through a screen of brush. A beaver swam in the river, its moving head making a quiet v in the still water above a dam. As he pounded closer, its flat tail slapped the water like a pistol shot, the point of the v sank from sight, and the ripples spread out and lost themselves. He could still see the beaver, though, swimming under water, its legs moving and the black tail plain, like something to follow. It was a big beaver, and it was making for a beaver lodge at Clell's right.

Clell dived, came up gasping from the chill of mountain water, and started stroking for the other shore. Beaver lodge! Beaver lodge! It was as if something spoke to him, as if someone nudged him, as if the black tail pulled him around. It was a fool thing, swimming under water and feeling for the tunnel that led up into the lodge. A fool thing. A man got so winded and weak that he didn't know medicine from craziness. A fool thing. A man couldn't force his shoulders through a beaver hole. The point of his shoulder pushed into mud. A snag ripped his side. He clawed ahead, his lungs bursting. And then his head was out of water, in the dark, and his lungs pumped air.

He heard movement in the lodge and a soft churring, but his eyes couldn't see anything. He pulled himself up, still hearing the churring, expecting the quick slice of teeth in his flesh. There was a scramble. Something slid

along his leg and made a splash in the water of the tunnel, and slid again and made another splash.

His hands felt sticks and smooth, dry mud and the softness of shed hair. He sat up. The roof of the lodge just cleared his head if he sat slouched. It was a big lodge, farther across than the span of his arms. And it was as dark, almost, as the inside of a plugged barrel. His hand crossing before his eyes was just a shapeless movement.

He sat still and listened. The voices of the Indians sounded far off. He heard their feet in the stream, heard the moccasins walking softly around the lodge, heard the crunch of dried grass under their steps. It was like something dreamed, this hiding and being able to listen and to move. It was like being a breath of air, and no one able to put a hand on it.

After a while the footsteps trailed off and the voices faded. Now Clell's eyes were used to blackness, the lodge was a dark dapple. From the shades he would know it was day, but that was all. He felt for the cactus spines in his feet. He had been cold and wet at first, but the wetness dried and the lodge warmed a little to his body. Shivering, he lay down, feeling the dried mud under his skin, and the soft fur. When he closed his eyes he could see the sweep of distances and the high climb of mountains, and himself all alone in all the world, and closer up, he could see the beaver swimming under water and its flat tail beckoning. He could hear voices, the silent voices speaking to a lonesome man out of nowhere or out of everywhere, and the beaver speaking, too, the smack of its tail speaking.

He woke up later, quick with alarm, digging at his dream and the noise that had got mixed with it. It was night outside. Not even the dark dapple showed inside the lodge, but only such a blackness as made a man feel himself to make sure he was real. Then he heard a snuf-



fling of the air, and the sound of little waves lapping in the tunnel, and he knew that a beaver had nosed up and smelled him and drawn back into the water.

When he figured it was day, he sat up slowly, easing his muscles into action. He knew, without seeing, that his feet were puffed with the poison of the cactus. He crawled to the tunnel and filled his lungs and squirmed into it. He came up easy, just letting his eyes and nose rise above the water. The sun had cleared the eastern sky line. Not a breath of air stirred; the earth lay still, flowing into spring. He could see where the Indians had flattened the grass and trampled an edging of rushes, but there were no Indians about, not on one side or the other, not from shore line to sky line. He struck out for the far shore.

Seven days later a hunter at Fort Lisa spotted a figure far off. He watched it for a long spell, until a mist came over his eyes, and then he called to the men inside the stockade. A half dozen came through the big gate, their rifles in the crooks of their arms, and stood outside and studied the figure too.

"Man, all right. Somep'n ails him. Look how he goes."

"Injun, I say. A Crow, maybe, with a Blackfoot arrer in him."

"Git the glass."

One of them went inside and came back and put the glass to his eye. "Naked as a damn jay bird."

"Injun, ain't it?"

"Got a crop of whiskers. Never seed a Injun with whiskers yet."

"Skin's black."

"Ain't a Injun, though."

They waited.

"It ain't! Yes, I do believe it John Clell! It's John Clell or I'm a Blackfoot!"

They brought him in and put his great, raw swellings of feet in hot water and gave him brandy and doled out roast liver, and bit by bit, that day and the next, he told them what had happened.

They knew why he wouldn't eat prairie turnips afterward, seeing as he lived on raw ones all that time, but what they didn't understand, because he didn't try to tell them, was why he never would hunt beaver again.

*He preached with a Colt .45*

## SIX GUN SERMON

W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

THERE WAS a new parson in the little slab-board church in Picture Rock Basin. He was a tall fellow, lean as any critter ever wintered through the hard Montana blizzards. He just stood up one Sunday in the absence of the circuit riding preacher and walked to the front of the church. From the inside his vest he drew a dog-eared Bible. He looked like a parson in his long frock coat, and the hollow ashes of his eyes strengthened the sepulchral austerity of his gaunt face. His voice had a cracking sound, like the shrill northern wind bending high branches through the canyon.

His doctrines were an odd amalgamate of all religions, plus a good bit that must have come from the Indian medicine men. But they listened fine and the old timers said they'd hold up good as solid stuff. So Clee Larson was kept on as regular preacher.

Some said he had come to the gold coast on a cholera ship by way of Panama. Some whispered he'd been seen atop a table in the *Bella Union* condemning all vice in

San Francisco into a blue hell. Others, just looking into his eyes, said he was a man who had suffered a lot. Anyway, most everyone thought he'd do all right as preacher.

**PALM SUNDAY.** The little church was crowded. Clee Larson had seen the three men come in late and seat themselves in a back row close to the door. A tremor passed through Clee's bony body, but not a shadow crossed his bland, angular face. One of the strangers was a bush-bearded miner. The second was smooth shaven, and his eyes were unhealthy-looking. The third was red-faced, burnt by wind and exposure in open places, and across his high cheek bone a jagged scar zigzagged to the corner of his thin mouth. Parson Clee Larson went right on with his christening.

There was a good deal of the Baptist about the way he christened the Hornblower twins. Ada was first, and he dipped her tiny, muslin-swathed body into a goldpan filled the sun-warmed water and then he handed the screaming baby to her mother who had a great towel waiting. Little, cherubic-faced Robert was next. He took him by the ankles and dipped him, shoulders first, into the brine. Then the door opened and five more men crowded into the rear of the church. They stood silently, broad hats in hand, until Clee had emptied his goldpan out the window and stood it to dry beside the altar. Then the boldest of the five cleared his throat and spoke. There was a shiny, tin shield with five points pinned on his cowhide vest.

" 'Scuse us, Reverend. There's been a killin' up at the Picture Rock diggin's and we followed our men down. There's three tired nags standin' by your hitch rail. We reckoned the killers came in here for safety. Can you tell us anything' about them horses? "

Clee's congregation had never seen such a light dawn across the features of their parson. The association of

ideas was bending the parson's mind into old back trails of the past. He gripped the altar tighter with his thin white hands. When he spoke his eyes were straight on the man who wore the badge.

"I'd let you know if I thought any members of my flock had not accepted God, Sheriff Morgan. Some ride to worship a great many miles on their horses."

"Sorry to bother you," Morgan said. "We just didn't want no trouble here." He and his posse shuffled out into the light.

For a long time there was silence. They could hear the possemen mounting, and then five horses padded softly away from the church. Sheriff Morgan was sending his men toward the mountains that rimmed the little town. Breath came easier inside the tiny church.

Clee Larson turned his head on its thin pivot and looked into the waiting faces. "The sermon today will be 'Ye Must Be Reborn Again,' " he said quietly.

He started in, a soft, low cadence to his carefully chosen words. He was tracing an example for his roughly garbed flock. He told them about a man he once had known intimately. "We'll call him Clee Larson," the preacher's voice droned, "and we'll suppose for a time that this man is me."

He painted for them a picture of a young student of the ministry who had fallen before the gold fever that swept over the land. He told of the long lines of passengers waiting for the departure of ships in New York harbor; impatient to be on their way toward the gold fields. Of the suffering of Clee Larson when he reached Chagres, the rottenest and most ungodly spot in all Christianity, where all men stole and cheated and the native women wore hardly any clothes at all. He told how men drank rum in the jungles and went mad, or waited around for ships that never came until their insides rotted from the filth of the country.

And then he jumped to the Sierras. Men who had been Clee's friends in the jungles were now his partners at the mines. How they searched for the bright, gleaming metal, and how the hopes burnt high in their breasts. Then Clee found a pocket; the richest, purest stuff on the hillside.

That night a Digger Indian girl was brutally offended. In the morning the chief came to their camp and brought the girl's father and her brothers and the girl herself. She pointed out Larson to them and held out his watch and chain for proof. Larson shook his head and denied all guilt or knowledge of the affair, but his partners acted as though they believed the chief's story, and they put Larson from their camp and jumped his claim. That night while Clee was rolled in his blankets the redskins struck. He climbed to his knees and fought back with his knife in self-defense. By sheer numbers they overpowered him and took him to their camp where they offered him the choice of accepting this girl as bride or suffer whatever punishment their chiefs would provide.

While he talked the parson stripped off his coat and vest. Wide-eyed, his congregation looked upon the pattern of welts criss-crossing their parson's chest. He failed to show them his back, but held his eyes, instead, close by the door.

"They let me go after seven years," Clee shouted. A violence was building behind his bland brows. The carnage of the past was running back through his fevered brain. "In seven years she found for herself a new mate and took him in marriage after their Indian fashion. But seven years have not been enough to cover the marks made by the knife of Clee Larson the night the redmen took him! They had a white leader that night and I stand here before him and demand one thing: Has he atoned for the sins of his past? Has he taken the Lord unto himself?"

The three men in the last row had risen as the par-

son's voice keyed higher. They backed for the door with drawn guns, wicked looks playing across their tight faces.

"Don't leave, my friends, for the sheriff is still outside the door," Larson's sharp words stung them. "Your only safety lies here, inside the House of the Lord."

An ugly, guttural noise came from the throat of the man with the scarred face. He lurched his body forward and the long gun in his hand filled the church with an ear-splitting crash. The parson stood solidly behind his pulpit. From somewhere behind it he had filled his hand with a frontier Colt. Another shot sang over the heads of the crouching congregation and they saw it fan the scant hair on their preacher's head. Then the gun in his hand spoke in answer to the scar-faced man; spoke with the only language this killer could understand. They turned and saw him sag limply and fall to the floor. Sheriff Morgan lurched through the door and hurtled over the body. His bared peacemaker shoved itself menacingly toward the remaining killers.

These two failed to be perturbed by the sheriff's actions. Their eyes were still held by the magic hole in the end of the sky pilot's pistol, and they submitted while the lawman slipped his cuffs over their hands.

Morgan turned forward to offer his thanks to the parson. He saw the preacher had laid aside his pistol and was covering his chest with his frock coat. The dead past with its haunting memories was gone forever. Gone was the cadaverous look from his wolf-lean face. The smoke of powder was the incense Preacher Larson had burnt this Palm Sunday; behind its drifting veils a fresh light was burning in the Reverend's eyes. Morgan found himself looking into a stranger's face. He understood now why his two prisoners cowered. Larson's spirit had miraculously rekindled in the crash of pistol fire.

He was free now of the weight of seven years of unjust punishment.

## THE LONG SHIFT

E. M. RHODES

ECHOES of the explosion yet volleyed from cliff to cliff; a thin cloud of smoke and dust hung heavily over the shaft mouth. They huddled together on the dump—the four men of the night shift, peacefully asleep a moment since: the young manager, still holding a pen in his nervous fingers; the blacksmith, the cook, and the Mexican water-carrier—all that were left of the Argonauts.

No one spoke; there was no need. The dynamite stored in the eighty-foot cross-cut, had exploded; no one knew how or why. The shaft walls had heaved and crushed together; the dump had fallen in for yards; the very hillside had slipped and closed over the spot where the shaft of the Golden Fleece had been. The eight men of the day-shift were buried alive. Working in the further stopes and cross-cuts of the deeper levels, they could hardly have been killed outright. Remained for them the long, slow agony of suffocation—or the mercy of the fire. For there was scarcely room to hope that the explosion had not fired the timber work.

They knew this, these silent men at the pit mouth; knew there was no chance that they could clear away the shaft in time—not if they were eighty instead of eight. To tear away that tangle of shattered rock was a matter of weeks; the air supply in the living grave beneath was a matter of days or hours. They knew, too, that their comrades were even then speaking hopefully of "the

boys"; that to the last the prisoners would hold unfaltering trust—in them! And one fell on his face and cried on the name of God—Van Atta, manager and half owner.

"No hope, no hope, no hope!" he sobbed. "We can't save 'em. Keough wanted me to put in a ventilator shaft. I wouldn't—and now I have murdered them! They will wait for us—wait—wait—O God! God! God!"

He was young, inexperienced, half-invalid yet, now brought for the first time face to face with sudden and violent death: small wonder if he broke down for a moment. A moment only—he sprang to his feet, his face new-lighted with hope and energy.

"The old Showdown tunnel! They will remember that—if they are alive they will expect us to break through from there! Keough intended to connect it with Gallery Four on the last level, to save hoisting. I surveyed it then—I know the bearings—we can tear out some kind of a hole—come on, men!"

They clamored down the steep, boulder-strewn mountainside, bearing drills, hammers, "spoons," picks, shovels, powder, fuse, caps, water, candles—all needful to begin work.

Near the face, far back in the winding tunnel, Van Atta drove a gad into the hanging wall. "Start from here. Keep an angle of forty-five degrees from the course of the tunnel, and a twenty degree dip. It is twenty-four to twenty-five feet in, and seven feet below us."

"Go!" said Price, holding the starter in place. White began another hole above him.

Van Atta raised his voice to be heard above the beating hammers. "Jones will sharpen steel now and help you later. The work will fall on you five; Charlie and I are out of it. The Mexican boy could do more work than either of us. We three will rig up some sort of makeshift ventilator, move the forge and cook outfit down, muck away for you, cook your meals. Save yourselves for the



drills. Tell us what you need, and we will get it. Jones will work our steel bars up into the longest possible set of drills. We'll shoot out till the longest drill will reach, and then drive a hole right through. We can pump in fresh air, then pour down water and coffee and soup, and break out the balance afterwards. If we only had more men! Had we better send some one to San Clemente for help? Or north to the ranches by Red Mesa?"

"Red Mesa is closer, but there may be no one there. It's forty-five mile to San Clemente," said Lone Miller. "We can't spare a man. By the time they got back, it might be too late—and the man's work here might make all the difference." He swung his hammer savagely. "But there's two other men besides ourselves on Malibu Knob. Doc Hughes is only five miles from here," he blurted out at last. "He is at the Nymyer copper claim and another Welshman with him. We can do it with them. They just got out from town. I saw them when I was out hunting yesterday afternoon. Doc is a dirty mutt—a lowdown camp robber. I'll get him yet, the damn scoundrel! . . . Not now. Maybe he'll come," he sneered. "Tell him it's our only chance for help—that we can't break through in time. Tell him I said so—me, Lone Miller—that I asked him to come."

"That's a whisky-bloat's job," said Charlie, the cook. "Keep your men for men's work." He was gone.

"The other monkey is good, too," said Miller. "Not so good as Caradoc Hughes, but a miner. Trust Cousin Jock for that."

Two of the night-shift were Welshmen. "Goeslong, my son," said one well pleased.

Swiftly the hammers fell, square and true; slipping so easily that the work seemed as effortless as driving tacks. But the back and shoulders were in each blow—the tough ash handles bent, the drills sank steadily into the rock. No ordinary toil—their best, and better than their best.

Without, the blacksmith beat a brave tattoo on the glowing steel, sharpening set after set of drills. The starters were a foot long, each succeeding drill five or six inches longer than the preceding one, and slightly narrower at the bit, so that it would follow in the hole. Seven or eight drills made a set, the longest four or five feet. Carefully he wrought, and watched with anxious eyes as he plunged the hissing points into the water and, holding them up, saw the temper draw steel-blue and white-specked to the edge.

Meantime the Mexican lad and the manager worked on their improvised ventilating rig—lengths of pipe laid down the tunnel, screwed together, and connected with an extra bellows set up on the dump. Before they were done, the first shots were fired. Leaving Clovis to finish tightening up the joints, Van Atta went into the tunnel. The candles smoldered faintly through the sickly smoke. White worked on a new hole. Williams, on his hands and knees between striker and holder, threw the broken rock to Price, who carried it farther back.

"That's it—that's good!" said Van, screwing a length of hose on his pipe-line to carry the fresh air quite to the front. "Whew! This powder is rank! I'll have fresh air pumped down in a jiffy. You two boys go back to the air till it's your time to drill. I'll get a wheel-barrow and muck away. Don't make the mistake of cutting the drift so small you can't work to advantage—and don't waste time pounding dull steel."

From this time on Clovis or Van pumped in fresh air steadily. Van, at the bellows, in the gathering dusk, glimpsed two speeding forms black against the sky-line. "Oh, good work! Good work, Cooky!" he cried exultingly. "Ten miles, and over that trail! He must have ran all the way over!"

A shout went up in the tunnel when Van told his news. "I was afraid something would happen," said Mil-

ler. "They might have been away—hunting, maybe. Sundown's the best time for deer."

A burly giant came puffing down the tunnel: Caradoc Hughes, huge, brutal, broad-chested, red-faced, red-haired, bull-necked, thick-lipped. He bellowed strange greetings and shouldered the striker aside. "Let's see, moi son! Taper off a bit!"

"Taaake foive," said Davis, following more quietly, as he took the drill from the holder. Caradoc grinned villainously at Miller. "Hallo! Hast thy gun, lad? Spaare moi life a bit, will 'ee? Have no time for scrappin' now."

"You're more useful alive, Taffy—just now," replied Miller, without looking up. Doc, chuckling coarsely, polished the drill-head with wicked, smashing blows. "Whoosh!" he grunted, expelling his breath violently at each stroke, as he brought the hammer down with all his bulk behind it. "Whoosh!"

Far behind, the cook limped painfully in. Later he brought steaming coffee and great Dutch ovens full of beef and beans. The bellows worked unceasingly, the wheelbarrow carried the broken rock away. At the front they paired off, changing at brief intervals, holding and striking alternately. They worked. . . . But the shots were frequent, the charges heavy; the giant-powder fumes—sluggish, stupefying, poisonous—hung in the air in spite of the ventilator, dragged on the men's energies, dulled the onset. Their heads ached relentlessly. As each relay came off, they hurried out to the blessed pure air; and, thinking of the prisoners, entombed and suffocating, stumbled back again to strike with all their manhood behind each blow.

Van, when they went out in the air, made them wrap up warmly, lest their tortured muscles should stiffen. Van sent Charlie to them with food and hot coffee. Van brought water. He was here, there, and everywhere, pumping at the bellows, mucking away, keeping the drift

true. The little man of brains anticipated every need; brought power or fuse already cut and capped; saving a minute here, half a minute there. He loaded and fired the holes, sparing his men so much of the labor and powder smoke. He praised them, cheered them on, kept their hearts up, voiced their pride; till each man nerved himself to utmost effort, thrilled to know that solid rock and stubborn granite were less enduring than his own unchanging will.

And, when he crept back to Charlie and Clovis, it was Van who despised himself, whose heartsick thought was that his feeble body unfitted him to do a man's work on the firing-line. . . . So the night wore on; and ever the hammers rang, the drills bit deep; slowly, steadily, inch by inch, foot by foot, they tore the prison wall away.

As he rested, Caradoc goaded his disdainful enemy with taunt and slur—"Little pot, soon hot"—and such ancestral wit. For a long time Miller made no answer to these rude sallies, but the insults festered. "You know the old saw, Doc," he said at last, with ominous quiet. "The Almighty made some men big and some small, but Colonel Colt evened things up. Best think it over."

After each shot the crews went to the drilling, leaving the muckers to work out with pick and gad, the rock loosened by previous shots, straightening the uneven walls and roof as best they could. Their desperate haste invited disaster. It came before dawn. White was holding for Williams, when a heavy rock jarred from the roof and fell on the striker's shoulder. The hammer, glancing from the drill head, crushed the holder's hand to mangled flesh. The work stopped. White rose unsteadily. "Keep a-hummin'—keep the hammers going," he said, as he started out, dizzy and sick. Williams, in scarce less distress for his unlucky blow, followed him.

"Bide a bit!" bellowed Caradoc. "Harken! I hear sum-

mat! God's love hear that! There's salve for thy hurrt, lad! They're alive, they're alive, I tell 'ee! Happen the heat's drivin' 'em down bottom by way o' the winzel!"

Tap-tap-tap! Muffled and dull and hollow it sounded from the rock before them. Tap-tap-tap! Doc snatched his hammer and thundered on the drill head. "They're livin'!" he roared. "Seven feet an' more we've made this night, and fair gettin' limbered up a bit!"

"I'll eat a bite and go to town after help," said White, as Van bandaged his hand. "I'm no good here, but I can walk, I tell you these men are fagged, I ought to know. If you get close enough to drill a hole through, 'twill be all. The strain will be over and every mother's son'll drop in his tracks. I'll send enough men from town to tear out the last ten feet by the roots."

"You can't, man. You're tired out and suffering. There is at least one bone broken in your hand. You'll give out."

"I—I wasn't aiming to walk on my hands, you know. Run along now. I'm twenty-one past, and it is my job to walk across Malibu Flat this day. If you look across the desert to San Clemente about dark, there'll be a big light on Ghost Mountain to let you know I made it. So long!" He filled a canteen and went to do his part; not the least where each did well.

The long weary day dragged as they toiled at their endless task. The Mexican lad loaded his patient burros with kegs and went to the spring for water. Before noon Van Atta was on the verge of collapse. The others forced him to quit his part in the mucking. "Else will us bind 'ee handfast," observed Caradoc. "Happen us'll need thy brains yet, lad. We'll be there with t' brawn—do 'ee keep care o' the only head here that's worth owt." So Van, cursing and shamed, cleaned out the holes when "mud" clogged them, picked out the followers, loaded and fired the holes, and sometimes took a short spell at pumping:

while Charlie and Clovis stacked up no more rock, for lack of time, but wheeled it far down the tunnel and dumped it.

The incessant clangor of steel on ringing steel—hammer and hold, hold and hammer—mud! Clean—change drills, hammer! Load, fire—clean away—room for the hammers! The air was hot, foul and intolerable, from candles, steaming breath and dripping bodies, dust and powder fumes. Hour after hour they drove home the assault; stripped to the waist, soaked and streaked with sweat and dust; with fingers cramped from gripping on hammer and drill; with finger-joints that cracked and bled, wrists bruised and swollen from jarring blows. The rough and calloused hands were blistering now; back, muscles and joints strained and sore; worse than all, powder headache throbbed at their temples with torture intolerable. . . . But the brave music of clashing steel rang steadily, clear, unfaltering, where flesh and blood flung itself at the everlasting hill.

A muffled roar came from the heart of the rock. The prisoners were working toward them.

"That's bad," said Van. "They'll make the air worse with every shot. They can't hit our drift short of a miracle. They are lessening their chances."

"I don't rightly know that," said Caradoc. "Was on the last shift in Gallery Foar, myself. Was a horse there, I moind, hard as the Gaates o' Hell. Happen they'll smash that up and save us mony the weary blow."

The terrible strain began to tell. But Caradoc and his indomitable foe kept the heartbreaking pace. Price was deadly sick, bleeding from nose and mouth; Williams' hurt shoulder was stiffened until striking was out of the question for him. So these two held. The others kept on pluckily, but their strength was leaving them. Inexorable Nature was extorting punishment for her outraged laws: the end was near, of men or task. The shifts were timed

no longer. Each man kept up the savage hammering till he felt his strength fail; and as he stepped back, breathless, a silent spectre behind rose up and took his place.

From the steel bars Jones fashioned a set of twenty-four drills, with all his cunning and loving care on every point; a hair's breadth difference between the bits, the longest drill twelve feet, its bit rarely wider than the octagonal steel; he welded rods of iron for spoons of suitable lengths. They made the last few feet of the drift wider and higher than the rest, to have ample room for double drilling. At sundown they set off the last shots. They had torn out fourteen feet; they must drill a hole through the eleven-foot wall that remained. They had scarcely started when Clovis came, pouring out a torrent of voluble Spanish. A fire blazed on Ghost Mountain.

One thing was left to fear. Thrice they had heard the muffled shots from within. Since then there had been no sign. Were the prisoners dead, or had they seen the unwisdom of further exhaustion of the air?

"They'll be too far gone to work, hours before they actually suffocate," said Van. "We'll be in time, please God!"

They called up every reserve that pride or hope or fear could bring. Two men struck at once, the hammers following each other so swiftly that it seemed impossible for the holder to turn the drill between blows.

"Scant mercy on they beasties this night," said Price. "They'll coom to t'hill-foot in foar hours. Near two they'll need to win oop t'hill—'tis mortal steep, an' they beasties'll jaded sore. Will be in season for t' Graveyard shift."

"Not so—coom midnight will be full soon. 'Tis a sandy desert and a weary hill by night."

"Be't midnight, then. Williams, moi son, canst hold t'drill alone? I be fair rested oop now, and can pound a bit. Us'll burn no more powder, an' t'air will clear oop ere long."

"Good for you, Cousin Jock!" said Miller heartily. By tacit consent Miller and Caradoc worked together. It depended on them—and they knew it. Shoulder to shoulder, blow for blow, they set their faces grimly to such work as few are called to do.

Neither Charlie nor Van Atta could be trusted to hold—for them to strike would be simply loss of time. The hole must be driven absolute true, or the drill would bind, and they would have to begin again. At intervals one of the others would hold, giving Williams a few minutes' respite to straighten his cramped and stiffened fingers. Van Atta cleaned the hole and called the depth. Ten inches; twenty—thirty—fifty—"Sixty inches!" he called exultingly. "An inch every two minutes, after all these hours! The world can't beat it!"

The drill "jumped" with crash and jar; Miller's hammer just missed Williams' hand, and Doc's, closely following, was checked in mid-air by a violent effort. The holder drew the drill and turned the point to the light. An inch was broken from the hit; any succeeding drill would batter and break at once; the hole was lost.

A despairing silence: Williams fell against the wall and hid his eyes. Doc's head dropped over his hairy chest. Miller's face was ghastly. . . . Van Atta picked up the starter, sank on one knee, with his face to the breast; holding the drill in place beside the lost hole, just above his shoulder, his eyes on the bit, he waited. A second—and Miller's hammer crashed down. *Glang! Glang! Glang!*

"God's blood!" Red with shame, the giant sprang up and showered down blow on mighty blow. A murmur ran around the circle; the little band closed grimly to the final test. Jones shaped the broken drill again and hurried back to bear his part. The two enemies were doing the work. The others worked gallantly—but the leaders



were making five inches to their two. What matter, where each gave his best? Five inches—ten—thirty—forty!

At fifty inches Price gave way, totally unable to do more. When Caradoc and Miller stepped back, breathless, Jones and Davis tapped away doggedly, but there was no force to their blows.

The Big Welshman had bitten his lip; blood trickled from his mouth as he grinned at his mate. "'Tis oop to us now. A rare team we make—and good for them beyond!"

Miller nodded. There was no contempt in his glance now. Truly, this was a man; fit to stand to a king's back, though he fought for his crown—strong of heart and arm—this man he had dared despise. Foot to foot, blow by blow, unyielding, unswerving, they stood up to the tremendous task. Sixty—seventy! Davis and Jones made a last desperate spurt and fell back, exhausted, utterly spent. Seventy-five!—*Miller and Hughes!*

They planted their feet firmly and looked into each other's eyes as they began again. Miller's hammer kept the appalling pace, gave no sign that his strength was failing—ebbing away with every blow. . . . Somewhere, out in the far-off world, there was music and light and laughter. Perhaps he, too, had known pleasure, running streams that laughed in the sunshine, the free winds of heaven—youth—love—rest. It might have been so—long, long since. He did not know. Life had dwindled to these narrowing, flinty walls, this dim-litten circle, with its wavering center of steel where they must strike—strike hard! He and Doc—good old Doc—brave Doc! . . . Something stirred in the shadows behind—far-off, meaningless voices reached him over the rising clangor of steel. . . . Men, perhaps. If they would go away. . . . They drew his reeling senses from the shining steel, that he must strike—strike hard! Eighty—eighty-five—ninety!

Without warning, Miller pitched over on his face, unconscious. Their best was down. What lay in the silence beyond that granite wall?

Caradoc leaned heavily against the wall while they bore his fallen foe away. "Look at him—'tis a man!" he said. There was no triumph in his tones. He staggered forward. "*Whoosh!*" he grunted, as he struck out. "*Whoosh!*"

His eyes were sunken in his head, his blotched and purple face was fallen in; his sobbing breath whistled between his clenched teeth, his breast heaved almost to bursting; but his mighty shoulders drove home the drill. Ninety-five inches—a hundred! And still that tireless hammer rose and fell!

"Easy—mud—mud!" yelled Price, at the drill. "It's done! We've struck their drift!"

A dozen light taps, and the drill leapt through. The incredible had happened. They had struck the side wall of the counter-drift made by the prisoners on pure guess. They pulled out the drill. A rush of foul, sickening air followed. Price shouted down the hole. A mumbled response came back. Van Atta thrust the nozzle of the hose into the hole, stuffed his handkerchief around it to keep it tight, and ran down the tunnel. Halfway out he met Charlie.

"Run!" he gasped. "We're through—they're alive; all of 'em! Pump—pump hard!"

Any San Clemente man will tell you the rest.

## SLOW DRAW—SUDDEN GRAVE

H. A. DE ROSSO

WILL OTT was in Seeley's bar, having a quick one, when King Pell walked in with Frank Leatherman. Ott had been talking with Herb Bates, whose quarter-section lay next to Ott's, but his voice died when he saw the two.

The men exchanged nods, and Jeff Seeley's voice sounded very loud in the silence. "What'll it be, boys?"

Pell and Leatherman ordered whisky, and then it was quiet again. Will stared out the open door at the bright sunlight that filled the main street of Rincon. He could see his wagon and team in front of Masterson's Mercantile. His wife, Susan, was in the store, and she should be done any minute now and then he'd be driving home.

Staring out into the sunlight and seeing everything so alive and clean doubled the distaste in his mouth. He said, "Let's go, Herb."

Bates nodded. They were making for the door when King Pell said, in his heavy way, "A word with you, Ott. You, too, Bates."

They stopped and turned, waiting for Pell to speak. He stood with his back to the bar—tall and heavy, his dark face impassive, his right hand playing with the golden watch-chain across his vest. His black eyes watched the two men.

"What's on your mind?" Ott asked tensely. He was tall and slim, and there was a slow grace to all his movements that belied the quickness in him. That was a pose. Know-

ing his own quickness in his every thought, in his laughter, in his anger, he made it a point to be slow and easy about things. But there were times when he forgot his caution. And now, glancing at Frank Leatherman's tied down -45, Will hoped that this would not be one of those times.

"We have our differences, gentlemen," King Pell said blandly. "How about settling them once and for all?"

"Go on," Ott said.

"You know I want Indian Valley," Pell said. "I need that land. I'm going into the cattle business on a big scale. When I bought the LL brand six months ago, I said I'd build it into the biggest iron in the state. If I'm going to run more cows, I'll need graze."

He took a cigar out of a vest pocket, bit off the tip, and lit the cigar. Leatherman was leaning with his elbows on the bar. His attitude suggested that he was totally uninterested in what was happening, but Will Ott knew better. Frank Leatherman didn't draw top gun-wages from Pell for nothing.

PELL SAID, through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, "I've offered to buy you fellows out, but you won't sell. Right?"

"Right!"

"I still want that land," Pell said slowly, heavily. "You know what that shapes up to."

"Yeh, I know," Ott said, and quick anger started to seeth in him. He glanced at Frank Leatherman, and knew a moment of fear. Not for himself—he was used to the ways of violence. That had been his life, until almost two years ago, when a bullet had smashed his right elbow, bringing to it a lingering stiffness and slowness that had written finish to his days as a gunfighter.

He was afraid for Herb Bates and those other farmers whose green acres filled Indian Valley. Ott knew what was coming. He'd lived through the bloody days of John-

son County. He knew the death and destruction King Pell could bring when he turned his hired gunmen loose.

So Ott's anger died, under the coldness that crept into him.

Pell's eyes were narrowed. "You're the kingpin in Indian Valley, Ott. I reckon you've done more than anyone else to keep those farmers from sellin' out to me."

Ott said quietly, "You just don't understand, Pell. We're not holding out for money. Indian Valley's our home. The land is ours, it means a lot to us. You can't understand because you have too much land. If you had only a little, that you worked with your own hands, that you lived from, you'd know why we'll fight for Indian Valley, and die for it."

Pell was silent for a while. Then he said, "So you'll die for it? That's kind of silly, isn't it, Ott? What good is your land to you when you're dead?"

"I'm not here to argue," Will said hotly. Frank Leatherman turned now for the first time, and stared at him. "If you've got something to say, say it!"

"All right," Pell said. "I've got a proposition. Instead of a lot of bloodshed, let's settle for a little. Frank here will rep for me, and you for the farmers, Ott. You were a gunfighter before you retired—one of the best. Frank will take you on. You win, Indian Valley is yours and I'll never bother you again. Frank wins, and the farmers promise to sell out to me."

He paused, and his stare was hot and heavy on Will. "If you're not afraid. . ." he said.

THAT EVENING, before he left for the meeting which Herb Bates said he'd arrange, Will Ott told his Susan about it. She listened quietly, as was her way, but he could read the pain in her brown eyes.

"That's how it is, Susan," he finished. "Pell and Leatherman know I'm through as a gunfighter. How they

found out, I can't understand. I've kept it to myself. Only you and I and that doctor in Laramie know the truth."

"What are you going to do, Will?"

"I don't know."

"You'll have to tell them at the meeting tonight. You'll have to tell them you can't go against Leatherman. You wouldn't have a chance."

"I know," he said wistfully. "But if I did have! If I had my old gun-speed again. . . ."

"Please, Will. Please don't talk like that."

"I could save so many lives—"

She began to cry, and he took her face between his hands and kissed her. "There, now, Susan," he said gently, "I was just wishing. Wishing that things were different. You should have seen Herb Bates afterward. I've never seen him so happy since all this trouble started. To him, the fight was as good as won. Me, the great Will Ott, the fastest gun-thrower north of the Rio! I was a cinch to win!"

He laughed bitterly. "I didn't have the heart to dash all his hopes. Now I've got to tell him anyhow, and it won't be an easy job. Maybe they'll think I'm scared and backing down. Maybe they'll say I'm yellow."

"But you haven't a chance, Will!"

"I know," he said. "I haven't one little chance, Susan. So I'll have to tell them tonight. It will be hell, though."

ON THE ride home he ran what he was going to say to Susan over and over in his mind. He hoped fervently that she would understand. She had always understood his motives in anything without his having to explain, and that was the strongest bond between them. But would she understand this time?

His steps were heavy on the gravel pathway leading to

the door. He paused a moment with his hand on the latch, then he opened the door and stepped inside.

She was seated in the rocker, reading. She watched him silently as he removed his coat and hat and hung them up. Walking over behind her, he took the back of the rocker in his two hands and squeezed until his knuckles showed white. He looked down at her, at the way the lamplight brought out the red gold in her hair and he bent his head swiftly, kissing her.

"Susan," he said achingly. "I'm a damn' fool, Susan!"

She gave a little cry. "Will?" she said. "Didn't you tell them?"

He spoke slowly, bitterly. "I intended to. I got up on my feet and I was going to tell them. But I looked over their faces and then I realized one thing I'd forgotten. Their kids.

"Herb Bates has five. Nels Erickson has six. There's a lot of kids in the Valley, Susan. We haven't a chance against Pell. I never wanted to admit it but now I've got to. These farmers are no match for Pell's hired guns. None of them would have a chance against Pell's killers.

"I got Herb Bates and Erickson and all the others to agree to sell out to Pell if I fall. They're certain I won't, which is why they agreed, but I know they'll keep their word. It's the only way out, Susan. . . ."

THEY MET in one of the back rooms of Jeff Seeley's bar. There were King Pell and Frank Leatherman, Will Ott and Herb Bates. King Pell was all smugness. The cigar in his mouth bobbed up and down when he spoke.

"Then it's all settled," he said to Ott. "Tonight at seven, you and Leatherman meet right here in front of Seeley's. Winner take all. Have all the witnesses you want—the more the better. No crooked work. Right out in the open. Better than a bloody range-war, eh?"

"Sure," Will Ott said. He turned to Bates. "You go on, Herb."

Bates' face registered his puzzlement.

"I'm gonna wait in town," Ott explained. "You go gather all the others that want to be here. Tell them at seven sharp."

Bates shrugged. "Sure, Will," he said, and went out.

Ott's black-handled .45 felt awkward and heavy and out of place. It had been two years since his waist had know the heavy sag of a filled shell-belt.

He dropped his right hand on the handle of his gun and let his gray eyes pass slowly over Pell's and Leatherman's faces. There was a touch of gloating and triumph deep in Pell's eyes. Leatherman's features mirrored nothing.

"I want to talk to the two of you," Ott said.

Pell drew heavily on his cigar. "I thought everything was settled."

"Yeah. Everything we talked about. But there's something we haven't talked about."

"And what's that?"

Ott jerked a thumb at the gunman. "Leatherman. I know his rep. He never tackled anything but a sure thing."

Leatherman scowled. "What do you mean?"

"You must be awfully sure of winning, else you wouldn't take me on," Ott told him levelly.

Pell flushed. "Are you hinting I'm not playing fair?" he demanded.

"Oh, it'll be a fair fight. It'll all be out in the open—just between me and Leatherman. But I've got a pretty good rep as a gun-thrower, Pell. A better one than Leatherman's. Seems strange you'd back a second-rater!"

Leatherman cursed. "I'll show you who's a second-rater!"

Pell waved a hand. "Take it easy, Frank. I think our



Mr. Ott has a little game up his sleeve. Isn't that right, Ott?"

"I'll let you figure that out," Ott said.

He turned his gaze back to Leatherman. Hatred blazed in the eyes of the gunman, and hate was etched in all the lines of his wind-burned face.

"You'll eat those words, Ott. Dammit to hell, but you'll eat 'em! Remember Kid Bisbee?"

Ott started a little. Sure, he remembered Kid Bisbee. That had been Will Ott's last gunfight. He'd downed young Bisbee, but not before the Kid had put a bullet in Ott's arm, smashing his elbow.

Pell said, "Frank."

LEATHERMAN growled, "You stay out of this, King. It's my turn to talk now. Can't you see he smells a rat? So let him know. Let him stew in the knowledge until seven. He won't back out. His pride won't let him."

Leatherman's laugh was cold and hard. "Sure, you remember Kid Bisbee, Ott. Only his real name was Leatherman, Bob Leatherman, my brother. You killed him, Ott, but he winged you. I've been on your trail for two years. You hid out on a farm, thinking no one would look for Will Ott among a bunch of broken-down farmers.

"I've been inquiring a lot about you, Ott. In two years I've learned a lot. I talked to a doctor in Laramie. He didn't want to say much at first—but I kind of persuaded him to talk. That clear, Ott? That enough?"

Will Ott couldn't say anything. He'd suspected this all along, but the confirmation left him momentarily stunned. He could only stand there, hand tight about the handle of his gun, that quick anger running all through him.

Pell hissed, "You fool, Frank."

"Watch what you say, King," Leatherman flared. "Watch what you say."

"But why did you have to spill it now?"

"I know what I'm doing. He won't back out." Leatherman's lips twisted in a derisive grin. "Think of the women and kids! That's what he's doing. And I want him to know in advance he hasn't got a chance. I want him to have that in mind when I empty my gun into him."

Will had fought down his anger. He said quietly, "Maybe it'll be just the other way around, Frank."

Laughing, Leatherman shook his head. "I don't bluff easy, Ott."

"There are other doctors," Ott went on quietly. "Better doctors than the one in Laramie."

He saw doubt flash over the gunman's face. Only for a moment, then Leatherman was laughing derisively again. "I don't bluff, and I don't scare!"

"I'm not a complete damn' fool," Ott said viciously. "You think I'd deliberately die for a bunch of nesters?"

Doubt returned to the gunman's face. He licked his lips. "You're scared," he said, the derisiveness gone from his tone. "You're scared, and you're tryin' to run a bluff."

Will said, his voice on edge, "If you think I'm running a bluff, Frank, go ahead and pull. Pull your gun. Let's get it over with. A few seconds and you'll know if I'm bluffing!"

Pell sprang between them. "Take it easy, Frank! Take it easy. Can't you see? He's trying to get you to show your hand. There's no witnesses here but me. He thinks he can put one over. He knows if something happens to him in here, there'll be trouble. Those farmers would never take that lying down. So don't get riled, Frank. Let Ott shoot off his damn' mouth. He won't do much talking after seven tonight. He'll do none at all!"

THOUGH HE had asked her not to come, Susan drove into town that evening. It was a half-hour before seven when

she arrived. Will Ott was in Masterson's Mercantile where the farmers had gathered. They understood and drifted away, leaving Will and his wife alone in the rear of the store.

Susan was hesitant. "I—I had to come, Will," she said.

He smiled. "I know. I wish you hadn't, but I'm glad you came."

Worry lay in the crease of her brow. "How does it go, Will?"

He would not look at her. Lifting his hand, he wiped the beads of sweat off his upper lip. His voice was grim.

"Not so good," he admitted. "I've been trying for two hours. The elbow is just as slow and stiff as ever."

"Oh, Will!" she said, and began to cry.

His face was drawn. "Please, Susan," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said, and her sobs gradually ceased. "You've enough on your mind without my carrying on like this."

"I've got a chance, Susan," he said. "I really think I have. I've got Leatherman doubting. Maybe he'll be rattled and unsteady. It isn't who gets off first shot that counts, if it's a miss. I really got a chance, Susan, and that's all I need!"

He hoped he sounded genuine, for Susan's sake. And also for himself. It went against his grain to admit he was whipped.

He glanced up to find Herb Bates approaching. Bates' face was pale. He said, "It's almost time, Will." Will thanked him, and Bates moved back to the front of the store.

Will looked down at Susan. He tried grinning again. "Well, this is it," he said. "Do you understand?"

"I do understand, Will, I do!" She was in his arms, crying softly, and her voice came through her tears.

Herb Bates' voice came from the front of the store. "Time, Will."

They walked together toward the front of the store. Herb Bates was waiting there.

"Everything set?" Will asked.

Bates nodded. "Just like you said, Will."

Will said, "Good." He wasn't taking any chances. When he'd seen Pell's gunmen filing into town, Will had instructed Bates to post farmers at vantage points, in case Pell started trouble.

"Cover Seeley's," Will had ordered. "And cover the Cinco House, too. Don't pass up a trick. First sign of any funny stuff, go to it. Pell might not keep his word if he loses, so be ready for him. But if we lose, you keep your word, Herb. I'm expecting that."

Will glanced across the street and saw that Leatherman had not made his appearance yet. Will looked down at Susan. A forced smile came to his lips. "Be seein' you," he said softly.

"Sure, Will," she said. "Be seein' you. . . ."

He looked up and saw Leatherman stepping out of Seeley's, followed by King Pell. Will loosened the gun in its holster and stepped off the boardwalk into the dirt of the street. The sun had just set, and the air was taking on its first chill. All about him was a heavy silence, like an enveloping veil, and he could feel the pound of his heart.

He looked about him, taking in everything one last time. The long flow of Rincon's main street, the weathered buildings on either side. The striped post in front of the barber shop . . . the Indian image outside of the cigar store . . . the canvas awning that shaded the front of the Rincon Drug Store. . . .

Then he turned his head briefly to look at Susan. She was standing there, watching him, and as their eyes met, she smiled and lifted one hand in a little gesture of encouragement. Will broke his gaze then, turning his attention to Leatherman, aware that the gunman had

caught Susan's gesture and was all the more nettled by it.

Will ran his left hand over his eyes, trying to wipe the images out of his mind. The sound of Susan's voice, the color of her hair, red-gold in the sun, the whiteness of her smile. All those things that would no longer be his. The memory of her warm, firm body in his arms. That was all past and irrevocable.

And instead of regret and sadness, he felt a hot anger rushing through him.

FRANK LEATHERMAN was walking slowly, right hand poised over the handle of his gun. Behind him, on the walk, stood big King Pell, watching, hand playing with the golden watch-chain strung across his vest.

The gunman's face was gray, Will saw. All his arrogance was gone. The man was scared, Will thought. Scared yellow. And Will groaned inwardly. If only he possessed just one little vestige of his old gun-speed—but he had nothing, nothing at all.

Still he forced a reckless smile to his face, saying, "There are other doctors than the one in Laramie, Leatherman."

He saw the man wince, fear flashed across his face. He glanced once, quickly, to where Susan stood, calm and confident. Then Leatherman drew. Fear had accelerated rather than slowed his draw. His gun whipped free of holster, began to roar.

Will's gun was just clearing leather. He'd not been wrong. He was slow, woefully slow. But there was a prayer on his lips. Leatherman's gun was flaming. Twice he fired, and all Will felt was a lone tug at his shirt-sleeve.

Leatherman's frantic hurry had disrupted his accuracy. Will's gun was free and level now. He prayed. *Let him miss once more.*

Leatherman fired again—and didn't miss. The impact shivered Will and the shock left him numb so that for a moment he did not know where the bullet had struck.

He had no time to figure it out, for his own gun was bucking against his palm even as he felt another bullet hit.

He knew he was staggering, weaving blindly, trying to reach the walk and Masterson's Mercantile. He thought he had seen Leatherman fall. There was thunder in Will's ears, like the furious popping of many guns, but his mind was reeling.

He tried to fight off the blackness, stumbling along, whispering, "Susan?" Where are you, Susan?"

Then the darkness came and he was falling, endlessly. . . .

When he awoke, in Masterson's home behind the store, Herb Bates told him all about it.

"Pell is through," Bates finished. "He put up quite a fight, but we came out on top. I got Pell myself. When his hired guns saw that the boss was dead, they quit cold. Indian Valley is ours, Will!"

"How—how many hurt?"

"Only three. None very bad. You got it worst of all, Will, but the doc says you'll pull out of it easy. I thought you was a goner when Leatherman beat you to the draw so easy, but he was way wild. You weren't. Straight through the heart——"

"Thanks, Herb," Will said, and Bates went out of the room, leaving him alone with Susan. She nestled her cheek against his, and some of the pain left his body. He found he could smile.

"It wasn't so bad, was it, Susan?"

She turned her face so that he might not see her tears. "No, Will," she whispered, "It wasn't so bad—and from now on it will be very good, for all of us."

*Would she settle for half a man?*

## AURELIA'S UNFORTUNATE YOUNG MAN

MARK TWAIN

THE FACTS in the following case came to me by letter from a young lady who lives in the beautiful city of San Jose; she is perfectly unknown to me, and simply signs herself "Aurelia Maria," which may possibly be a fictitious name. But no matter, the poor girl is almost heart-broken by the misfortunes she has undergone, and so confused by the conflicting counsels of misguided friends and insidious enemies that she does not know what course to pursue in order to extricate herself from the web of difficulties in which she seems almost hopelessly involved. In this dilemma she turns to me for help, and supplicates for my guidance and instruction with a moving eloquence that would touch the heart of a statue. Hear her sad story:

She says that when she was sixteen years old she met and loved, with all the devotion of a passionate nature, a young man from New Jersey, named Williamson Breckinridge Caruthers, who was some six years her senior. They were engaged, with the free consent of their friends and relatives, and for a time it seemed as if their career was destined to be characterized by an immunity from sorrow beyond the usual lot of humanity. But at last the tide of fortune turned; young Caruthers became infected with smallpox of the most virulent type, and when he recovered from his illness his face was pitted like a waffle-

mold, and his comeliness gone forever. Aurelia thought to break off the engagement at first, but pity for her unfortunate lover caused her to postpone the marriage-day for a season, and give him another trial.

The very day before the wedding was to have taken place, Breckinridge, while absorbed in watching the flight of a balloon, walked into a well and fractured one of his legs, and it had to be taken off above the knee. Again Aurelia was moved to break the engagement, but again love triumphed, and she set the day forward and gave him another chance to reform.

And again misfortune overtook the unhappy youth. He lost one arm by the premature discharge of a Fourth of July cannon, and within three months he got the other pulled out by a carding-machine. Aurelia's heart was almost crushed by these latter calamities. She could not but be deeply grieved to see her lover passing from her by piecemeal, feeling, as she did, that he could not last forever under this disastrous process of reduction, yet knowing of no way to stop its dreadful career, and in her tearful despair she almost regretted, like brokers who hold on and lose, that she had not taken him at first, before he had suffered such an alarming depreciation. Still, her brave soul bore her up, and she resolved to bear with her friend's unnatural disposition yet a little longer.

Again the wedding-day approached, and again disappointment overshadowed it; Caruthers fell ill with the erysipelas, and lost the use of one of his eyes entirely. The friends and relatives of the bride, considering that she had already put up with more than could reasonably be expected of her, now came forward and insisted that the match be broken off; but after wavering awhile, Aurelia, with a generous spirit which did her credit, said she had reflected calmly upon the matter, and could not discover that Breckinridge was to blame.



So she extended the time once more, and he broke his other leg.

It was a sad day for the poor girl when she saw the surgeons reverently bearing away the sack whose uses she had learned by previous experience, and her heart told her the bitter truth that some more of her lover was gone. She felt that the field of her affections was growing more and more circumscribed every day, but once more she frowned down her relatives and renewed her betrothal.

Shortly before the time set for the nuptials another disaster occurred. There was but one man scalped by the Owen River Indians last year. That man was Williamson Breckinridge Caruthers of New Jersey. He was hurrying home with happiness in his heart, when he lost his hair forever, and in that hour of bitterness he almost cursed the mistaken mercy that had spared his head.

At last Aurelia is in serious perplexity as to what she ought to do. She still loves her Breckinridge, she writes, with truly womanly feeling—she still loves what is left of him—but her parents are bitterly opposed to the match, because he has no property and is disabled from working, and she has not sufficient means to support both comfortably. "Now, what should she do?" she asked with painful and anxious solicitude.

It is a delicate question; it is one which involves the lifelong happiness of a woman, and that of nearly two-thirds of a man, and I feel that it would be assuming too great a responsibility to do more than make a mere suggestion in the case. How would it do to build him? If Aurelia can afford the expense, let her furnish her mutilated lover with wooden arms and wooden legs, and a glass eye and a wig, and give him another show; give him ninety days, without grace, and if he does not break his neck in the mean time, marry him and take the chances. It does not seem to me that there is much risk, anyway,

Aurelia, because if he sticks to his singular propensity for damaging himself every time he sees a good opportunity, his next experiment is bound to finish him, and then you are safe, married or single. If married, the wooden legs and such other valuables as he may possess revert to the widow, and you see you sustain no actual loss save the cherished fragment of a noble but most unfortunate husband, who honestly strove to do right, but whose extraordinary instincts were against him. Try it, Maria. I have thought the matter over carefully and well, and it is the only chance I see for you. It would have been a happy conceit on the part of Caruthers if he had started with his neck and broken that first; but since he has seen fit to choose a different policy and string himself out as long as possible, I do not think we ought to upbraid him for it if he has enjoyed it. We must do the best we can under the circumstances, and try not to feel exasperated at him.

*No one man could move all that cattle*

## TRAIL DRIVER'S LUCK

ALAN LEMAY

FOR A week the noise of the trail herd had beat steadily upon the ears of Frazee: by day a muffled rumble of hoofs, a sound deep and thick as a wrapping of hot cotton; by night an incessant dry bawling of thirst-tormented cattle. Now that he was away from the herd he noticed with surprise that the vast sun-baked levels of the Mexican plain still had a silence like the end of time, or the peace of God.

Yet there was an unrest under the silence, a small stir somewhere in the far northeast, up by the Texas border. So small was that irritant under the quiet that it could almost be forgotten, like a touch of cactus dust on the skin. Only when you listened carefully, unbreathing, could you be certain that to the northeast there were rifles popping, hundreds of them, in a straggling, shapeless battle.

That far-off rustle of gunpowder was very much in Frazee's mind, however, as he pulled up before the rancho of old Mario Contrera, just as the sun dropped behind the Sierra Madres.

The house of the Contrera rancho was long and commodious, and close to what ought to have been water; there were trees about it that had been set out long ago, and still lived, bent but mighty. Only the orchards behind had died utterly in the desert air. And only old Mario Contrera himself, who now came out of the house to speak to Frazee, was bent like the trees; a man who had had unusual height, but had lost it in the twist of the years. His mustache was as gray as if it had been full of alkali, and he had a bitter, furrowed face.

"Contrera?"

"Si."

"My name's Frazee," said the rider. They spoke in Spanish. "Any water in your crick?"

"None."

"Nor any in——"

"Nor any place this side of the border itself."

Frazee shrugged, swearing silently. "There's clouds, though, there on the Sierras, Contrera."

"Always! Always!" Contrera's words burst out of him in passionate gusts. "All this devil's own summer, clouds hanging on the Sierras. But rain? Never! Never! And may God witness——" He paused, and made a hopeless ges-

ture. "But—dismount, my friend. You must be thirsty and hungry."

"*Gracias.*"

A RAGGED boy took Frazee's horse, and the two men walked together to the house. "*Como se va?*" said Frazee, flicking his eyes northeast.

Contrera was in no doubt as to what Frazee meant. What should anyone be asking about but the progress of the revolt? A dark emotion twisted old Mario's face as definitely as if it had been gripped by a hand.

"Esparza stands like a bull. He still holds Ojo Caliente."

"Good!"

"You favor the revolt?"

"I favor Cherry Frazee," said the rider harshly, indicating himself. He chuckled, but in a way that Contrera perhaps did not like. "That dust—there in the southeast—my cattle are raising that. Five thousand damned gaunt, black-tongued, low-horned head! That is—they were five thousand three days ago. Naturally, we're losing a few."

"I heard of your purchase, señor. And your drive up from Las Lomas. A valiant effort, my friend! I sympathize deeply."

"Sympathize?"

"This hell's own frying pan sucks the life out of cattle as if they were tadpoles, this year," said Contrera. "And to drive across it a starved and weakened herd——!"

Frazee laughed harshly. "I'll put them over the border in four days. And then—I've got hay at Loring, held for me until the tenth of August. Hay and water will fix 'em up."

"Ah, Loring," said Contrera. His voice suggested that Loring was two miles beyond doomsday, as far as Frazee's cattle were concerned. "The cows are strong? You have plenty of men?"

"The cattle can hardly stand; I have two men with me, and loafers at that!"

Contrera tossed up his hands.

Frazee grinned. It had taken all he had, and all his credit, to tie up hay at Loring, and to buy—even for a song—a drought-punished herd deep down in old Mexico. This, however, was the sort of battle with urgency that he liked and was made for. Long chances were his natural roads to fortune, punishment his meat.

Contrera stood aside to let Frazee precede him through a cool, dark hall to an inner patio where the earth was kept firm and dustless by the water it drew up—and wasted—from an enormous cistern in the middle.

A girl was standing by the cistern head. Instantly, before he saw her face at all, Frazee knew who this was. He would have known the shadow of her shadow in hell, by just the bend of her head. The recognition took effect upon Frazee with a curious sense of shock; and immediately a small world of memories rushed through him like a flood released—so swift, yet so complete, as to be less a recollection than an emotion.

FRANCISCA CONTRERA must have pretended not to hear them, for had she heard their approach it would have been her duty to remove herself from the patio. Young Spanish women did not receive chance strangers, under the reign of the old ways. But Frazee knew women well enough to know that she had probably watched him ride up from a long way off. All that went through his head when he first saw her standing by the cistern head, her face turned away.

But that was in the background, a shadow. The important thing was that he had once held this girl in his arms, and kissed her well enough to make her remember him, once and for all. That had been at a fiesta that he

had crashed at Monte Solano two years—three years ago, it must have been.

It had been a hard job, that day three years ago, to get a moment with her alone. So heavily chaperoned were those upper-class Spanish girls that few would have tried it. But Frazee had achieved perhaps three minutes alone with the girl in a shadowed walk that passed between a chapel and a clump of bamboo, and before her duenna had come seeking her he had seen all her pretended aloofness melt within the pressure of his arms.

Now, as she met his eyes for an instant in her father's patio, he saw the blood come into her face, and knew that she had had the same instant memory as he.

"Francisca," said Contrera, "let me present Señor Frazee—a drover." The last two words exploded ill-temperedly, telling Frazee that the introduction itself was intended as a rebuke. "My daughter," he said to Frazee with the same dryness, "We will excuse you, Francisca."

As she left them she sent Frazee a glance full of laughter, such as some women use to tease men who have had some small part of their favor, but will have no more. But what Frazee got out of it was a sudden conviction that he should have found out who she was, and searched her out again long ago. Until today, though he had remembered her often, he had never known her name.

A small wizened priest—or was it a friar?—in a brown robe and an incongruous little stiff-brimmed straw hat, joined them as Contrera provided wine, and presently food. After the inevitable peppered beans and meat there was white tequila, and with the closing of the hot dark Contrera became a little more expansive. As the old rancher monotoned the history of his misfortunes, what with repeated war and everlasting drought, Frazee found that he sat stark awake, where he would have expected to drowse. He had glimpsed a white mantilla at a patio

window, and knew that Francisca's eyes were upon him: and when this was gone he remained intensely conscious of the girl's presence in the house. He was listening and waiting, without knowing for what.

Mario Contrera seemed waiting also. Behind the old man's monotone was an edge, as if he knew that something was about to happen, or that some word was to arrive that was going to change the meaning of everything on that hot, dry plain. Yet, when that word came, it was Frazee who was the more openly affected.

A rider, a blunt-faced, swarthy man with Indian eyes, dropped off his horse before the outer door; and when he was admitted stood fumbling his hat before Contrera.

"Señor"—the messenger's word rattled like machine gunnery—"Esparza breaks! He falls back. His cavalry is God knows where. Ojo Caliente falls; he is beaten out of it. The army of the people is strung out for fifteen miles, and whoever is last, that is the rear guard, can protect themselves as they can. They say he cannot rally at the Moro as was thought; they say he will not stand now until Boleros; and if God does not strike over his shoulder there, it is done. They say——"

"You're sure of this?"

"Señor, I myself rode among the——"

"How far is the retreat from Ojo Caliente?" Frazee demanded.

"*No lejos.*" That was the Mexican measurement: far, or not far. It might mean a day's march or a mile.

"Will the advance reach Boleros tomorrow night?"

"Señor, no! I am only here because I rode like the cinders of hell. Esparza——"

"In two days then?"

"As God wills."

Frazee smashed a furious fist down upon the table, and smoking words rumbled in his throat.

"Loring will never see the cattle of Frazee, señor," said

Contrera with weary amusement. "In two days—three—there will be a twenty-mile wall of starving soldiery between. It is confiscation, señor!"

"They'll have to come fast, then," swore Frazee. "I'm a long shot nearer Boleros than he is, and once my herd point sets hoof——"

"I understand your cattle could hardly stand up," said Contrera.

"By God, I'll hold 'em up if I have to tail 'em up! If that herd stops here it'll die where it stands. If only I had twenty——"

"I have not a man to spare you," Contrera forestalled him.

FRAZEE'S EARS still drummed with the beating shuffle and hawl of that low-headed, spraddle-legged herd of his. To bring that herd to feed and water was to send his fortunes rocketing; to fail in this or to walk into confiscation at Boleros was to lose everything he had. The chance had been a slender one to begin with, and the odds were multiplying against him; yet, inarticulately, a sense of approaching triumph was upon him.

"I tell you this," said Frazee, his voice low and harsh. "Everything I have is in that herd of cattle. As you say, I cannot drive cattle through a rout of starving men. But if I'm first to Boleros, if I get that herd to the border——"

"I have not a man to spare you," said Contrera again. "I'm sorry, my friend."

Frazee relaxed and grinned.

"*Bueno*," he said. "I have only two men, and those worthless; but I'll put four thousand of those five thousand head over the line!"

"Three men, with half-dead cattle, reach Boleros before Esparza? Impossible!"

"You'll see it done before the week's out."

Contrera shivered. "It's time for sleep," he said wear-



ily. "A man is lucky to have a bed, and a roof over it, in times like these."

Alone in the little cell-like room assigned him, Frazee stood looking out of the window. The brush-dotted plain lay flat and silent under hot, brassy stars, and the Madres were lost in the dark. The broken whisper beyond the northeast horizon seemed stronger now.

The yammer of a coyote drowned the ragged murmur of the distant guns, and he turned away. Slowly he stripped, and sponged himself with tepid water from an earthen jar. Slowly also he pulled on his dusty clothes. He meant to be gone from there long before dawn.

Then suddenly he became acutely conscious again that the girl was somewhere near at hand, in the same household, under the same roof. She had been partly eclipsed, for a little while, by the necessities of his low-headed herd; but now his mind filled with her so completely that he could not stretch out on his bed, nor attempt sleep.

He considered the layout of the rancho; and what he instantly pictured was the dry, withered orchard, divided by the dry serpentine bed of the river that had failed the trees.

FRAZEE STEPPED to his window. It was set with bars, but the first one that he tried cracked in his grip. Those bars must have been eaten into shells by the dry rot, for three or four of them almost went to dust as he broke them out with his hands, and stepped out into the open starlight of the plain.

Quiet-footed, he walked where the brown-leafed willows stood hot and lonely under the stars, marking the course of the waterless river. Then his eyes found a gleam of white, and he grinned, and the night was lonely no more.

In spite of his assurance, his certainty of himself, he had less than half expected that she would really be there. Yet she was there, waiting for him just as certainly as if it had been prearranged.

"*Buenas noches*," she murmured, her voice faintly cordial. "What are you doing here?"

"Came out to talk to you," he said.

"And who asked you to do that—drover?"

"Now, pish, tush," said Frazee. He took her arm, and clamped it against his side; and though she stiffened she walked a little way farther from the house with him before she broke away.

"What was it you wanted say?" the girl asked.

"I've been looking for you for three years," Frazee heard himself lie. "I don't know as you've been out of my mind an hour. And now I've run onto you again, I don't mean to leave you go."

SHE SMILED up at him sidelong, queerly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm going to marry you."

They stood silent; and the lonely Mexican night pressed nearer to them, hot and close. Then she looked at him curiously, and the cool poise seemed to go out of her. She began to laugh, almost silently, in her throat.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded hotly.

"I was thinking of José."

"Who's José?"

"Did you ever see a man named José Exnicios?"

"No."

"I'm going to marry him the tenth of August. We leave for the South in three days."

"The hell you are!"

"Why am I not?"

"Because before those three days are up I'm coming

after you. And you'll be ready to come with me, and you'll come with me—you hear?"

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll take you; and I tell you this: it'll take more than the army of Mexico, and all hell, and you yourself to stop me."

A strange-voiced exclamation sounded startlingly, very close at hand: the breathy cry of an old man who comes sharply upon unutterable horror. Frazee, jerking up his head, saw the withered padre, shadowless and vague in the starlight. Then Francisca spoke.

"Padre," she began, her low voice unexpectedly clear and cool, "before you speak, before you judge——"

The robed figure stirred as if released from a spell. "You had better go in, my child."

Francisca obeyed. But first she leaned close for half a second to Frazee, speaking to him in a desperate whisper: "Within three days?"

"Depend on me."

SHORTLY AFTER daylight he found his herd, bedded eleven miles east of the Contrera rancho. That day Frazee did the work of three, changing horses at noon. His good vaqueros had deserted him for the fortunes of war—and his two remaining riders did little work, and that sullenly.

To see that every beast of that bawling, stumbling ruck moved steadily, never hurried, yet never lagging nor wandering aside, would have been an insuperable job for many more men than Frazee; but it meant the difference between failure and success. He swarmed at it like a man inspired, a grim, grinning glow in his reddened eyes as he worried the stragglers. The whisper of rifle fire was stronger now, but still far to the east; and a faint haze on the horizon showed him where Boleros lay. He had never

been surer in his life that he was close to a great victory. One day more. . . .

One day more to pass Boleros. Then the next day the two punk riders could muddle the herd along as best they could, for the chief danger would be past. That would leave Frazee free to kill a horse returning to the Contrera rancho for the girl. Francisca would be with him on the last short day, while they pressed the herd across the border to Loring, the goal that had been ahead of him for so long.

In a sense she was with him already. All that day they plugged across Contrera lands, and somehow that knowledge made her seem closer; as if her presence followed with him, like the sun.

Then, late in the afternoon, an Indian boy came riding a paint pony out of the southwest, whipping up side-and-side with his tie rope as he came in sight of the herd. He handed Frazee a tiny twist wad of paper.

When Frazee had smoothed the paper out he still had to stop his horse before he could decipher, with difficulty the hesitant, sketchy little scrawl of three words that it contained.

"Never after tonight——"

"The señorita?" he demanded.

"*Si, señor.*"

"And what does she say?"

"Nothing, señor."

"You don't know what she wants, or anything about it, but just this fool wad of paper?"

"Nothing, señor."

"What night is she talking about?"

A blank stare was all he got out of that.

"Then—go hump that far bunch back into the show—pick 'em up, pick 'em up, but easy, see, or I break your——"

"*Si, señor!*"

away from him slowly, slowly, as fortune was slipping out of his grasp.

He began to laugh, cracking his dry lips. This was the turning point of his career; yet he found himself without hesitation or doubt. Jauntily he kissed his hand to the herd, and unbuckled his chap strap to get at his money belt beneath. Then he signaled his riders in.

It was not long after starlight when Frazee, leading an extra horse, came within sight of the Contrera rancho again.

He sent the Indian boy ahead to see if anyone was up, and if possible to tell Francisca that Frazee was here. Then, while waiting at a distance, a strange fear lay cold across his shoulders, so ghastly pale and dead that house looked under the stars.

The boy was gone a long time, more than an hour, it seemed to Frazee. He came slinking out at last, so nearly invisible in the little light that Frazee did not see him until he was very close.

"The señorita—?"

"I don't know."

"See anyone?"

"No one, señor. *El padre*. I saw the padre. He saw me, too, but I didn't want to talk to him, I ran out of his way."

"In hell's name, what took you all this time?"

"I looked all over. The horses are gone from the stable."

"Horses? What horses?"

"All the family horses, the kept-at-the-house horses: though there is stock in the corral that——"

Frazee swung into his saddle and put the pony to the house at a run. At the heavy front door he knocked twice, but when nothing moved within he ran around

NEVER AFTER what night? Last night? If it was that, he could call it meaningless. But if never after *this* night—Never what after when?

If Francisca had only had the sense to— But he knew that there was purpose in the ambiguity of those three words. She had to guard against interception, and so had written what should be meaningless to anyone but him. Ironically, it was meaningless also to Frazee. But she had sent for him, he was pretty sure of that; and if she sent for him she had a reason. . . .

He wasted a futile moment reestimating the two riders who held the point to its trail—two men of not much guts, sick and disgusted long ago with what they felt was a hopeless job. He knew with utter certainty that those two would never attempt to work the herd through for him alone, or succeed if they tried. If Frazee left the herd here those worn-out cattle would scatter where they stood, to die presently in the unrelenting drought.

“Never after tonight—”

Suddenly he saw that he was at the end of something. One thing or the other was over with and done.

He sat motionless on his stopped horse, watching the mile-long straggle that the herd had become. They plugged along unevenly, a long welter of gaunt backs under a haze of dust. There in the slow hoofs of the cattle walked fortune. That herd was the tide which, “taken at the flood—” Frazee himself was the very soul of that tide, the heart and guts of it that walked it on—as much a part of it as it was of him. And though his teeth were set hard into victory the odds were heavy against him yet, and that was hardest of all: for the grip of utter urgency that was upon that herd held him with an all but resistless appeal.

The straggling tail of the herd passed him now, plodding doggedly with swinging heads. And finally the last gaunt cow, a staggering calf at her flank, passed and drew

the house to the window of his room of the night before. Here he entered through the broken window bars, and went striding on into the patio.

The ubiquitous little padre was sitting by the cistern head, a lantern beside his feet.

"You, old man—where's Francisca?"

The padre's voice shot back at him, unexpectedly harsh and sharp. "And who knows if you don't?"

"What do you mean? Do you mean to say she's——"

"Her family left this morning—Contrera changed his plans for reasons that you should know best. But before they left, the señorita—she was gone."

"Gone where?"

"It's supposed," said the padre almost savagely, "that you took her!"

"So the family——"

"They thought you had ridden south; naturally you wouldn't try to rejoin your herd under their very noses. They have gone southward in pursuit."

"Padre, listen: I never took her! I don't know anything about it!"

"You swear it!"

"Sure I swear it!"

The little old man stood staring at Frazee with eyes like lancets. "What has happened here, then?" he mumbled dimly.

Frazee seized the old man by the shoulders as if he would shake his brain awake. "Think, padre: where could she go? What could happen to her here?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't know. . . ."

A silence fell upon them, as complete as if the world had turned still as the sky. Then softly, somewhere in a far wing of the house, Frazee heard a door open and close.

He snatched up the lantern and went running into

the shadows of the still house, not calling out, but with quiet feet, trying to listen as he went.

In her own room, on her knees beside her bed, he found Francisca. She seemed afraid of him now, and hid her face; but when he gathered her up in his arms she buried her face in his shoulder and wept.

"Child, what's happened?"

"I wouldn't go south with them, I wouldn't go—but I had to trick them. I hid my saddle, and myself with it, and they thought I was gone. They're looking for me—and you—in Monte Solano, by now, I suppose. I knew you'd come. But you took a long time. . . ."

The padre came, following the lantern light, his slippers slop-slopping on the floor tiles. Francisca freed herself from Frazee's arms and stood quiet, facing the robed old man—tall and serene, and certain of herself, like a young-faced madonna; except that there was an unmadonna-like smoldering fire behind the surface of her eyes.

"You are about to marry us, padre," said Frazee.

"But if that is impossible?"

"Then, by God, I'll take her anyway!"

"But—if—"

"And I'll go with him," said Francisca.

The padre regarded them with miserable eyes. Then, "Stand here before the cross," he said at last. . . .

"Where's your saddle?" Frazee asked when the padre was gone.

He could hardly hear her answer, her voice had turned so shaky and faint. "There's no need . . . Isn't this our house tonight?"

WAKING A short hour before dawn, Frazee strained his eyes against such blackness as he could not remember having seen before. There were no longer stars beyond the window bars; but the night had lost its silence, and



the whole of the vast desert was filled with a new rush and moan of sound that at first he could not believe.

Gently he drew his arm from under Francisca's sleeping head; but once clear he reached the window in a bound. A slash of water struck in through the jalousie and whipped wet across his face, bringing him broad awake. For an instant more he stood incredulous; then with one sweep of his arm he knocked the rotted shutter out of the way, and stepped out into the downpour.

He spread out his arms to it, prayerfully letting the mild, big-dropped deluge run down his body in rivulets, and paste his hair down into his eyes. He was picturing to himself his wet-backed herd thirstily sucking up the saving water from rivulets and swales. She was sure enough his luck, luck past all believing! If he had pushed on, into the path of that hard-pressed retreat—

In the whirl and sleet of the rain he was hearing the shuffle of numberless hoofs; and he knew that he was listening to prophecy, the rain's promise to him of mighty herds unborn.

*All guts—and a horse*

## THE STORY OF THE COWPUNCHER

CHARLES M. RUSSELL

SPEAKIN' OF cowpunchers," says Rawhide Rawlins, "I'm glad to see in the last few years that them that know the business have been writin' about 'em. It begin to look like they'd be wiped out without a history. Up to a few years ago there's mighty little known about cows and cow

people. It was sure amusin' to read some of them old stories about cowpunchin'. You'd think a puncher growed horns an' was haired over.

"It put me in mind of the eastern girl that asks her mother: 'Ma,' says she, 'do cowboys eat grass?' 'No, dear,' says the old lady, 'they're part human,' an' I don't know but the old gal had 'em sized up right. If they are human, they're a separate species. I'm talkin' about the old-time ones, before the country strung with wire an' nesters had grabbed all the water, an' a cowpuncher's home was big. It wasn't where he took his hat off, but where he spread his blankets. He ranged from Mexico to the Big Bow River of the north, an' from where the trees get scarce in the east to the old Pacific. He don't need no iron hoss, but covers his country on one that eats grass an' wears hair. All the tools he needed was saddle, bridle, quirt, hackamore, an' rawhide riatta or seagrass rope; that covered his hoss.

"The puncher himself was rigged, startin' at the top, with a good hat—not one of the floppy kind you see in pictures, with the rim turned up in front. The top-cover he wears holds its shape an' was made to protect his face from the weather; maybe to hold it on, he wore a buckskin string under the chin or back of the head. Round his neck a big silk handkerchief, tied loose, an' in the drag of a trail herd it was drawn over the face to the eyes, hold-up fashion, to protect the nose an' throat from dust. In old times, a leather blab or mask was used the same. Coat, vest, an' shirt, suits his own taste. Maybe he'd wear California pants, light buckskin in color, with large brown plaid, sometimes foxed, or what you'd call reinforced with buck or antelope skin. Over these came his chaparejos or leggin's. His feet were covered with good high-heeled boots, finished off with steel spurs of Spanish pattern. His weapon's usually a forty-five Colt's six-gun,

which is packed in a belt, swingin' a little below his right hip. Sometimes a Winchester in a scabbard, slung to his saddle under his stirrup-leather, either right or left side, but generally left, stock forward, lock down, as his rope hangs at his saddle-fork on the right.

"By all I can find out from old, gray-headed punchers, the cow business started in California, an' the Spaniards were the first to burn marks on their cattle an' hosses, an' use the rope. Then men from the States drifted west to Texas, pickin' up the brandin' iron an' lass-rope, an' the business spread north, east an' west, till the spotted long-horns walked in every trail marked out by their brown cousins, the buffalo.

"Texas an' California, bein' the startin' places, made two species of cowpunchers; those west of the Rockies rangin' north, usin' centerfire or single-cinch saddles, with high fork an' cantle; packed a sixty or sixty-five foot rawhide rope, an' swung a big loop. These cow people were generally strong on pretty, usin' plenty of hoss jewelry, silver-mounted spurs, bits, an' conchas; instead of a quirt, used a romal, or quirt braided to the end of the reins. Their saddles were full stamped, with from twenty-four to twenty-eight-inch eagle-bill tapaderos. Their chaparejos were made of fur or hair, either bear, angora goat, or hair sealskin. These fellows were sure fancy, an' called themselves buccaroos, coming from the Spanish word, *vaquero*.

"The cowpuncher east of the Rockies originated in Texas and ranged north to the Big Bow. He wasn't so much for pretty; his saddle was low horn, rimfire, or double-cinch; sometimes 'macheer.' Their rope was seldom over forty feet, for being a good deal in a brush country, they were forced to swing a small loop. These men generally tied, instead of taking their dallie-welts, or wrapping their rope around the saddle horn. Their chap

arejos were made of heavy bullhide, to protect the legs from brush an' thorn, with hog-snout tapaderos.

"Cowpunchers were mighty particular about their rig, an' in all the camps you'd find a fashion leader. From a cowpuncher's idea, these fellers was sure good to look at, an' I tell you right now, there ain't no prettier sight for my eyes than one of those good-lookin', long-backed cowpunchers, sittin' up on a high-forked, full-stamped California saddle with a live hoss between his legs.

"Of course a good many of these fancy men were more ornamental than useful, but one of the best cow-hands I ever knew belonged to this class. Down on the Gray Bull, he went under the name of Mason, but most punchers called him Pretty Shadow. This sounds like an Injun name, but it ain't. It comes from a habit some punchers has of ridin' along, lookin' at their shadows. Lookin' glasses are scarce in cow outfits, so the only chance for these pretty boys to admire themselves is on bright, sunshiny days. Mason's one of these kind that doesn't get much pleasure out of life in cloudy weather. His hat was the best; his boots was made to order, with extra long heels. He rode a center-fire, full-stamped saddle, with twenty-eight-inch tapaderos; bearskin anceroes, or saddle pockets; his chaparejos were of the same skin. He packed a sixty-five-foot rawhide. His spurs an' bit were silver inlaid, the last bein' a Spanish spade. But the gaudiest part of his regalia was his gun. It's a forty-five Colt's silverplated an' chased with gold. Her handle is pearl, with a bull's head carved on.

"When the sun hits Mason with all this silver on, he blazes up like some big piece of jewelry. You could see him for miles when he's ridin' high country. Barrin' Mexicans, he's the fanciest cow dog I ever see, an' don't think he don't savvy the cow. He knows what she says to her calf. Of course there wasn't many of his stripe. All punch-

ers liked good rigs, but plainer; an' as most punchers 're fond of gamblin' an' spend their spare time at stud poker or monte, they can't tell what kind of a rig they'll be ridin' the next day. I've seen many a good rig lost over a blanket. It depends how lucky the cards fall what kind of a rig a man's ridin'.

"I'm talkin' about old times, when cowmen were in their glory. They lived different, talked different, an' had different ways. No matter where you met him, or how he's rigged, if you'd watch him close he'd do something that would tip his hand. I had a little experience back in '83 that'll show what I'm gettin' at.

"I was winterin' in Cheyenne. One night a stranger stakes me to buck the bank. I got off lucky an' cash in fifteen hundred dollars. Of course I cut the money in two with my friend but it leaves me with the biggest roll I ever packed. All this wealth makes Cheyenne look small an' I begin longin' for bigger camps, so I drift for Chicago. The minute I hit the burg, I shed my cow garments an' get into white man's harness. A hard hat, boiled shirt, laced shoes—all the gearin' known to civilized man. When I put on all this rig, I sure look human; that is, I think so. But them shorthorns know me, an' by the way they trim that roll, it looks like somebody's pinned a card on my back with the word 'EASY' in big letters. I ain't been there a week till my roll don't need no string around it, an' I start thinkin' about home. One evenin' I throw in with the friendliest feller I ever met. It was at the bar of the hotel where I'm camped. I don't just remember how we got acquainted, but after about fifteen drinks we start holdin' hands an' seein' who could buy the most and fastest. I remember him tellin' the barslave not to take my money, 'cause I'm his friend. Afterwards, I find out the reason for this goodheartedness: he wants it all an' hates to see me waste it. Finally, he starts to show me the

town an' says it won't cost me a cent. Maybe he did, but I was unconscious, an' wasn't in shape to remember. Next day, when I come to, my hair's sore an' I didn't know the days of the week, month, or what year it was.

"The first thing I do when I open my eyes is to look at the winders. There's no bars on 'em, an' I feel easier. I'm in a small room with two bunks. The one opposite me holds a feller that's smokin' a cigarette an' sizin' me up between whiffs while I'm dressin'. I go through myself but I'm too late. Somebody beat me to it. I'm lacin' my shoes an' thinkin' hard, when the stranger speaks:

" 'Neighbor, you're a long way from your range.'

" 'You call the turn,' says I, 'but how did you read my iron?'

" 'I didn't see a burn on you,' says he, 'an' from looks, you'll go as a slick-ear. It's your ways, while I'm layin' here, watchin' you get into your garments. Now, humans dress up an' punchers dress down. When you raised, the first thing you put on is your hat. Another thing that shows you up is you don't shed your shirt when you bed down. So next comes your vest an' coat, keepin' your hind-quarters covered till you slide into your pants, an' now you're lacin' your shoes. I notice you done all of it without quittin' the blankets, like the ground's cold. I don't know what state or territory you hail from, but you've smelt sagebrush an' drank alkali. I heap savvy you. You've slept a whole lot with nothin' but sky over your head, an' there's times when that old roof leaks, but judgin' from appearances, you wouldn't mind a little open air right now.'

"This feller's my kind, an' he stakes me with enough to get back to the cow country."

*And behind the door was a gun*

## THE POISONER

BENNETT FOSTER

THOSE DAYS strychnine was sold over the counter, like soap, and nobody asked how it was to be used. If you bought soap, people knew it would end up in the wash-tub; if it was strychnine, they knew you were going to poison wolves. It was taken for granted.

When my brother, Bob, had the Stoneman Creek ranch, he wouldn't use poison. That was one reason the captain took Bob home with him. The other reason was that the captain thought Bob was sweet on your grandma. Your grandma says that she didn't so much as look at Bob. She says that he was just the same as the other men around the place, but I've never been sure. Bob was might personable when he was a young buck.

When we left the steam cars at Miles City, the captain and I took a buckboard and drove two days. The evening of the second day we were among our cattle and the captain had to drive around every little bunch we saw. He loved a cow, that man did. I'd never seen what a year on close-sodded, curly buffalo grass would do for a southern steer, and I tell you it made my eyes bug out. Those steers had come north when they were three-year-olds, and here they were, four, and really beef, so fat they waddled when they walked.

"It puts the tallow on 'em, Jebbs," the captain said. "Owin' this northern grass makes us pretty near even

with the damyankees," The captain had been with J. E. B. Stuart at the beginning of the war and he was a bitter-ender. He'd named me after his old commander, James Ewell Brown Stuart Farnford. It made a handful of a name, so we used the initials.

"Yes, sir," he said. "This northern country is what Texas was when I first came. It's virgin territory and we've capitalized on it. Just look at that steer!"

Headquarters, in those days, was a log house, a sod stable and some corrals. I didn't build the big house until about ten years later, to please your grandma.

When we drove up, Bob and six dogs came out of the stable. Bob cussed the dogs off us and shook hands. He was bigger than I remembered, with a big, bushy beard.

"I see you brought the kid," Bob said. "Goin' to leave him with me?"

"Maybe," the captain said, and we unloaded and went to the house.

There was a room of new logs built against the back, and when we got inside, the whole place was neat and clean as a pin. The captain looked around and then turned to Bob.

"You've got a woman around here," he said.

"Yes, I have," Bob said, and grinned. "I've got Zoe Birdsong cookin' for us. . . . What did you think of the cattle you saw?"

He couldn't sidetrack the captain that way. "Women make trouble," the captain said. "You don't need her."

"This one don't make trouble," Bob told him. "I've got her daddy trappin' wolves. And wait till you eat her cookin'!"

The captain grunted. I never heard him swear but once, but he could do real well with a grunt. "I don't like it," he said. . . . "What about the wolves? Have they been bad?"



"Real bad," Bob said, and went on. Most of the winter loss he'd had among the cattle had been caused by wolves.

"Are you baitin' 'em?" the captain asked, when Bob finished.

"I haven't used poison," Bob said.

"Why not?"

"Well," Bob said, "I'll tell you. The buffalo are gone and the Indians used to live on the buffalo. Now we've got to feed the Indians or they'll starve. The wolves lived on the buffalo too. It ain't their fault if we've took their livin' away. I'll trap a wolf, or shoot him, or run him with dogs, but I won't poison him. It ain't fair."

"You're a fool," the captain said. "Would you kill an Indian if he was stealin' beef?"

Bob got red in the face. "Shoot him, yes," he said. "But I wouldn't poison him."

"This woman's got something to do with your foolishness," the captain said. "I'll bet on that."

"No." Bob shook his head. "It's just the way I look at things."

The captain studied Bob a minute and then shook his head. "Well," he said, "what cattle are left look good anyhow. How is the hay?" They talked cattle and grass and water until the men came in.

Bob had four riders at headquarters: Bates School and Bigbee Kemp and Morris Juhl and Wilke Sloane. He had four more at the two line camps. The men shook hands and went to wash up. While they were washing, Jesse Birdsong arrived.

Jesse looked about sixty years old. He hadn't any beard and his white hair reached to his shoulders. I don't think he'd eaten salt on his meat for forty years. He walked like an Indian, easy-stepped and with his feet in line, and he carried a rifle in a leather case, and a knife a foot long

dangled from his belt. He was the first squaw man I'd ever seen.

Bob said, "How, Jesse."

Jesse said, "How."

Then Zoe Birdsong came to the kitchen door and told us supper was ready. She was a small, neat girl with black hair, and she wore moccasins like her father, but her dress was calico.

Supper was good. Zoe waited on us, and when we were done we went outside to smoke. The captain drew Bob off to one side. "Why didn't you say the woman was a breed?" he asked.

Bob spoke so low that I couldn't hear his answer, but the captain said, "You know a breed's no good."

That sounded queer, coming from him. Many a time I've heard him brag about his Indian blood. He was an eighth Chickasaw and he used to say that his people had been sitting on a rock, waiting for the Pilgrims to land. He and Bob walked off, and I listened to the men because what they said was all new grass to me. I knew Texas and cows, but I didn't know Montana and steers. When the captain and Bob came back, I could see that both of them were mad.

For the next two days we looked over the ranch, and the evening of the second day the captain got Bob and me together.

"Bob," he said; "I leave tomorrow and you'll go back with me. You've been here three years and it's time you ate your mother's cooking again. I'll leave Jebbs here."

Bob didn't speak for a minute. Then: "Ain't you satisfied?" he asked.

"I'm pleased with the ranch and I'm pleased with the cattle," the captain said. "You've done well. But now it's time Jebbs learnt this end of the business. You boys will have it all when I'm gone and I want you both to know every bit of it."

"Jebbs is pretty young," Bob said.

"He's gettin' older." The captain looked at me. "You do as well as Bob's done and you'll be all right. It's a big responsibility, and you'll be in charge. . . . Now, Bob, get your traps together, so we can leave, and I'll tell Jebbs what I want done."

Bob went off and the captain talked to me, telling me about the shipping and what cattle I'd receive. The last thing he said was that he'd come again before fall.

"I'll see that you're set for the winter," he said, "and when I come back, I want to find them Birdsongs gone."

So then I knew why he was taking Bob and leaving me.

They left next morning, and I was lonesome. I was just nineteen, and while I'd had the say around the home place, this was different. Back in Texas I'd had folks to lean on when the captain was gone, but in Montana there was nobody but old Bates School, and if I knew Bates, he wouldn't stand for much leaning. Still, there was nothing to do but take hold. The next few days I rode and looked and talked to the men. They were all older than I was, but I was the boss. I didn't want to break up a smooth-running outfit, so I took my time.

The headquarters men liked Zoe Birdsong. "That Zoe," Bates said, "makes the difference. Maybe she's a breed, but her cookin' is purely good an' she keeps house fine. She knows how to look after a man."

He didn't have to tell me; I could see. Still it made me mad because I knew I was going to let the Birdsongs go.

"Don't she make trouble?" I asked. "Don't the men quarrel over her?"

Bates laughed. "With old Jesse packin' *that* knife an' that old Sharps?" he said. "Don't be foolish. The boys leave her alone. And they sure admire her biscuits." Bates was no more help than I'd thought he would be.

So I talked to Jesse and rode with him. He hunted wolf dens and, when he found one, dug it out. And I saw him

kill two wolves with his Sharps, long shots, both times. After I'd been with him awhile he commenced to talk to me.

Jesse was seventy, in place of sixty as I'd thought, and Zoe's mother was his second squaw. One of Deer Robe's cousins had been his first wife, but Two Kettles' sister was Zoe's mother. Zoe was related to half the Sioux on the reservation. Jesse told me he'd come out with the American Fur Company, away back yonder, and decided to stay in the country. He was more Indian than he was white.

We talked wolves too. Jesse told me the Sioux name for them and showed me the hand sign. That old man was a regular book, once he began to talk, and I could see where he would grow on a man. What with Zoe's cooking and housekeeping, and Jesse's talk, I knew how Bob had felt, because I felt the same. If the captain wanted to get shut of the Birdsongs, he would have to do it himself.

A month after the captain left, I told Jesse that we were going to use poison on the wolves. We had seen the carcass of a big, heavy steer on our ride—one that had been pulled down by wolves. Jesse said that a dog and a bitch, teaching their pups to hunt, had done the killing and he'd set some traps. Seeing that steer made me just sick. I guess I love a cow brute as much as the captain did.

At first Jesse didn't say much, but after a while he came at me with the argument Bob had used, about the buffalo and the Indians and the wolves. I wouldn't listen. I said I was going to get some strychnine and put out baits, and that was that. So Jesse shut up and didn't say another word.

That night he quit. I paid him off, and next morning the two of them, Zoe and her father, left the ranch. All their truck was on a travois fastened to Zoe's old pony.

and they went north and didn't look back. So, when I went to Miles City for supplies, I had a cook on my list as well as strychnine. I got the cook, a man named Dupriest, and I got the poison. But neither worked as well as what we'd had. Dupriest couldn't cook or keep house, and the poison didn't get as many wolves as Jesse's traps. I tried it and killed three of the dogs at headquarters, and when I saw what the strychnine did to them, I was as sick as I'd been about the steer; sicker, I guess. I tried the poison just that one time.

There was an immigrant trail through the west end of the ranch, and all summer long wagons went over it. A man named Mayhew came over the trail and lost all the filling out of a wheel. He couldn't go any farther, and Bates found him. Bates gave me an idea.

Here was a man that needed work, Bates said, and a woman that could cook and keep house and look after us. Why not hire them? I saw Bates' point and made Mayhew a proposition that he took. We turned to and made a new soddy close to the house, and the Mayhews moved in. I fired Dupriest and we just licked our lips, waiting for that first meal.

Mrs. Mayhew was all right, and so was the boy, Tom. Old Henry wasn't worth a damn, and Lola—that was the girl—was just like him. I didn't find that out at first. Lola was as pretty as a little red wagon, and that blinded me to her failings. But I learned about Henry right away. How that man ever managed, I don't know. He showed me where he wanted to put in a vegetable garden that would feed us all, and talked about getting a cow and some chickens, but when I told him to go ahead, he had trouble. His team was too poor to break sod, so I gave him a ranch team. Then his old moldboard plow wouldn't scour, and after we'd sharpened it he broke the beam. The garden never was started.

Anyhow we got to be too busy to garden. The captain

wrote, telling me to start shipping, and for a while I wasn't around headquarters. We rounded up steers, a thousand at a time, and moved them to the railroad, where professional shippers took them off our hands. And we hardly had the last of them gone before the first of our new cattle came. The trail boss told me that the captain had bought two herds in Motley County and that we would get a third herd from the home place. Six thousand head of three- and four-year-old steers, all told. We spread out the new cattle and I left Bates in charge to get them located while I went to hire a hay crew.

You can't be choosy in hiring men to work in hay, and I guess I got the worst bunch of deadbeats and loafers there was in Miles City. I turned them over to Henry Mayhew, thinking he could at least make hay, but I was wrong. That old man couldn't even look after his girl. Lola was supposed to help her mother, but she didn't. She'd come down to where the hay was cut, and when she walked past a bunch of men and swung her hips, the haying stopped. The men would hang around the soddy at night, and after I'd stopped three fights, I'd had enough. I put on my six-shooter and took hold of the hay crew myself and sent Henry to help his wife. Bates had to run the cattle.

We got the second Motley County herd and I got the hay up and took the men back to town. When I got back, our Muleshoe cattle were in from home. Dave Jordan, the trail boss, told me that the captain was on his way. We spread the cattle out, getting them located, and Dave's outfit left. They hadn't been gone a day before the captain came.

I was out when he got to the ranch. When I got in, old Henry Mayhew was telling him about the vegetable garden and the cow and the chickens. The captain nodded to everything Henry said. Tom had killed some young

sage hens with my rifle, and that night Mrs. Mayhew spread herself for supper, Lola waited table. She kept leaning over the captain, asking if he wouldn't have a little more of this or some more of that. When supper was over, the captain gave me a cigar.

"I see you've got things pretty well in hand, Jebbs," he said. "It looks like you'd done real well."

He told me then how things were at home, all about mother and how Bob was courting one of the Higgins girls, and he asked me how I'd got rid of the Birdsongs. I told him about the poison and the luck I'd had. He squinted at me through the cigar smoke.

"You just didn't know how," he said. "What you need is a professional at the business. I'll tell you what, Jebbs. Suppose I take that off your hands? I've promised to get Mr. Mayhew some garden seed and a milch cow if I can find one. I'll get a man to handle the wolves at the same time."

I was willing.

"I think you done right about these Mayhews," the captain told me. "It looks to me like they're good people. That old man can garden and do chores, and he can handle your hay crews, and the woman's a good cook. The boy and girl are all right too."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him how worthless Henry was, and that Lola raised hell with things, but I didn't say a word. There are times for a man to keep his mouth shut, and this was one of them. The captain went on talking, but I didn't listen. I'd learned something. I'd learned that he was just human like the rest of us. It was a shock, too, because I'd never thought that way before. But there he was, just as pleasant as a bag of apples, because of the soft soap the Mayhews had given him.

We looked things over for the next two days, and the

third day the captain went to town. He was gone six days. When he came back he was as setup a man as I ever saw. He hadn't got a milch cow, but he had three chickens in a sack, and a whole bunch of garden seed. And he had a stranger with him.

"Shake hands with Leo Riordan, Jebb," he said when he got out of the buckboard. "I told you I'd get you a wolfer."

I shook hands with Riordan and told him to get his stuff into the house. When he was gone, I turned to the captain. "I thought you didn't like breeds," I said.

"Riordan's a professional wolfer," the captain said, and got red, as he always did when he was crossed. "He's worked for several people and he's got a reputation for results. Maybe he is a breed. I don't care. You've got to have a little wolf blood in you to understand wolves. You let him handle the wolf end and you look after the cattle."

So we went into the house.

The captain stayed four more days. We went out with Riordan and watched him work, and I will say that Riordan knew what he was about. He made a drag like I'd done, only he handled his bait with little wooden tongs in place of his hands, and he wore smoked gloves when he made the baits. The third day we went out and found two dead wolves along the drag. The captain rubbed his hands together and looked at me like "I told you so."

When he left, things settled down at the place. We got two loads of corn for horse feed. The steers were locating fine; there wasn't a thing went wrong. All we had to do was wait for winter.

I'd never seen a northern winter and I wasn't prepared for this one. Along late in November the first blizzard hit us and I thought the end of the world had come. But



Bates and Bigbee and the rest didn't seem to bother. The storm lasted a couple of days, and the third day we were riding again, wearing fur caps and sheepskin coats and chaps, and leaving off our spurs. It's queer how a cold spur can burn a man's heel. The steers hadn't drifted much. They were well located, and knew where shelter was, so they moved into it. A steer is like a man. If he knows the country he's all right, but if he doesn't know the country, he's in hard shape. I commenced to appreciate that we'd received our cattle early and given them time to get settled down.

After the first storm, there were others. We holed up when the wind blew and the snow fell, and we rode when it didn't. All our cattle were strong, the wind kept the ridges clear, and we had hay to feed if we needed it. We kept up two horses each, grained them and stabled them at night, and we did fine.

Riordan did all right with his wolfing too. He set a line of posts across the ranch and bored holes in them. When the wolves got to calling on the posts, like they will, he put poisoned tallow in the holes. He killed some wolves that way. He set traps, too, and caught some, but there was one outfit he couldn't catch. There was a big black loafer wolf that didn't fall for the traps, or the drags Riordan made, or the calling posts he'd set.

Wolves run in packs in the wintertime and Blackie had six others following him. They did us damage. They killed cattle, and after one of the wolves got poisoned at a carcass, they ate nothing but fresh beef. Riordan tried everything he knew, and he swore that Blackie was wise as a man. It was the loafer leader that kept Riordan from getting the others, and it got to be a regular feud between him and Blackie.

I didn't like Riordan. I thought he was too narrow between the eyes when I first saw him, and I didn't change

my opinion as time went on. He wouldn't mix with the crew at headquarters, and when he went out to the camps, the boys there didn't like it. I had to warn him off Lola, too; but then, I'd had to warn everybody but old Bates off her. She was a man-chasing little devil. The boys at the camps came down to headquarters to see her, neglecting their riding. Bigbee Kemp and Morris Juhl and Wilke Sloane were at one another's throats over her, and when she wasn't raising sand with them, she'd try her hand at me.

I won't say that she had no luck, either. I wear pants, just like other men, but I had that ranch and cattle on my hands, and no time for foolishness. I tell you, that was a bad winter—not the weather outside so much as the things inside the house. If there had been a way to get rid of the Mayhews, I would have. But I couldn't turn them out in the wintertime.

We got along through November and December, and January started out with a regular howler. It stormed for four days and some cattle drifted. Riordan had no luck in his feud with Blackie. Lola kept the men and me on edge, and right after the storm Zoe Birdsong came back to the ranch. She was all alone, riding that old pony, with the travois dragging behind. Jesse had died, she said.

I didn't ask too many questions. From what she told me, I gathered that she wasn't going to stay with her mother's people. Why, she didn't say, but I figured that a woman alone among the Sioux didn't have it too easy. Anyhow, Mrs. Mayhew was down sick when Zoe showed up, and Lola and old Henry were trying to handle the kitchen. I put Zoe back into the lean-to and told her to take hold. She did it, and nursed Mrs. Mayhew to boot.

About a week after Zoe came back, Leo Riordan tried a new wrinkle on his wolf catching. One of the dogs I hadn't poisoned was a bitch, and Riordan staked her out at the edge of some timber above the creek. He set traps

around her, figuring that Blackie would call. Wolves breed in January clear through until March, and he thought this would do the trick. But it didn't. I went up with Riordan to see how his scheme had worked, and there the bitch lay with her throat torn open. Blackie's pack had killed her. I expected Riordan to blow up, but he surprised me.

"I'll get a wolf bitch," he said. "I'll trap one and use her. It takes a wolf to catch a wolf."

I had fallen into the habit of talking to Zoe. She was the only one at the ranch that wasn't fighting somebody else. Lola had them all fighting over her. That night I told Zoe what had happened and what Riordan said.

She nodded when I told her. She was darning some of my socks and she looked real pretty sitting there in the light with her work basket on her knees.

"He is right," Zoe said, "and he will catch the wolf."

January was half gone when Riordan caught his bitch wolf and brought her in. She had been hurt by the trap, and Riordan put a chain on her and staked her to a post. He didn't give her any food or water, and in the evenings he would go down with a stick and torment her with it. That wolf would have died if it hadn't been for Zoe. Zoe set out food and water and asked me to make Riordan quit his teasing. I was glad to, but it didn't make Riordan like me any better.

He kept the wolf chained for a week, then took her out and staked her where the dog had been. I went with him and watched him set his traps, and next morning he went back.

Riordan had caught Blackie, all right. When we rode up, the big wolf quit fighting the trap and stood, facing us. Riordan lifted his rifle and took a shot. He hit Blackie in the loin and broke the wolf's back. I'd seen Riordan shoot, and knew it was no accident.

"You devil!" he said, cussing at the wolf. "I've got

you!" He fired again and hit the wolf in the belly. Blackie went down, and he must have suffered, but he pulled himself up on his front legs and kept facing Riordan. I couldn't stand any more. I pulled my pistol and fired twice. I killed Blackie the first shot; the second was for the bitch.

"Go on and scalp 'em," I told Riordan. "I'll pay you for 'em."

I rode off then. I think if I had stayed another minute I'd have made a third hit on Riordan. Maybe it was because I was upset that I let Morris and Wilke go to town. They had been pestering me for a week, to go but I'd put them off. This time I told them to go on and not bother me.

We had good luck and there was no storm while they were gone. When they came back, they were loaded down, and they had some liquor. I didn't know it until supptime, when no one came to eat. I went down to the stable, and there were all four, drunk as lords, and staggering. Riordan was there, too, but either he hadn't taken as much as the others or could hold more. He was sober enough to help me get them to the house and into bed.

After we'd taken care of the men, I went into the kitchen, expecting Riordan to join me. When he didn't, I went back to the bunkroom, and there he sat sucking on a bottle. I took the bottle from him and told him he'd better go to bed too. He didn't say a word; just pulled off his moccasins and turned in.

I stayed up awhile, talking to Zoe, and then went to bed myself. About midnight I heard her call. When I got into the kitchen, there was Riordan fighting with her at the lean-to door. I jerked him away from the girl, took a knife away from him and then gave him the devil. I beat the hell out of him there in the kitchen, and I think I'd

have killed him if Zoe hadn't stopped me. I was going to comfort Zoe, but she did the comforting. She talked until she had me cooled down, and she got me to promise not to run Riordan off. She knew that the captain had hired him, and I guess she was trying to look after me. Neither one of us was thinking too straight anyhow.

Next day there was a mighty weary bunch around the place. They had headaches, Riordan's face was bruised, and nobody wanted to talk to me. But we did our riding, just the same. That night Mrs. Mayhew was back in the kitchen and Lola was on hand.

When we were done with supper, they got me off to one side. Mrs. Mayhew said that she felt fine now and would keep on cooking and that Lola would help her. She said that Lola had been busy nursing her, and that she was sorry she'd been sick.

I knew how much nursing Lola had done; Zoe had done the nursing. I told Mrs. Mayhew I was glad she felt better.

"You won't need that girl no more now," Mrs. Mayhew said. "I'm glad you had her while I was sick, but now that I'm up again, you can let her go."

"I expect I'd better keep her anyhow," I told her. "You might get sick again."

Mrs. Mayhew sniffed and said she felt all right and wasn't going to get down again, so I just said, "Zoe will stay," and that was all there was to it.

Then Lola came at me with another proposition. She wanted to have a Valentine party. Morris and Wilke had brought a lot of truck out from town, and Lola was going to make valentines for everybody and have a big time. Mrs. Mayhew said she'd cook a big dinner, and I couldn't see anything wrong with the idea. I said all right, and that I'd get word out to the camp men.

It was three days before Valentine's Day, so I rode to

the camps to invite the boys. News of the party had chirked things up around headquarters, and the drunks were cheerful again. But not Riordan. He watched me when we were together, and when I'd ride, it seemed I could still feel him watching me. The second day, when I came in, Mrs. Mayhew sidetracked me again.

"That girl," she said. "She ain't done a tap of work since I got up. I've called on her to help me, and she wasn't even in her room."

"Is that so?" I said. "Maybe she's been out someplace then." I walked out the back door of the kitchen.

Zoe's old pony hung around out back. She gave him bread and potato peels and such, and he stayed close. He was there when I walked out, and I could tell he'd been ridden. I went back inside and hunted up Zoe.

"You've been riding," I said. "Have you been following me?"

"Don't get mad, Jebbs," she said. "I've been following you. I've been watching you."

"Afraid of Riordan?" I asked.

"I'm afraid of him," she said. "I was wrong the other night. You'd better fire him."

"It's too late for that," I said. "And I don't need watching. You can stay home and help Mrs. Mayhew."

The next day we ate light because of all the fancy cooking going on, but we didn't mind. We knew we'd make up for it at the party. I kept an extra-special watch on Riordan, but he didn't do a thing out of the way. He carried in water and wood and made himself useful around the kitchen, and that was all I could see.

Valentine's Day we sat down to the table about noon. Lola had fixed up valentines for everybody, and the boys had presents for her. There was a lot of laughing and talking. Mrs. Mayhew had really cooked a dinner. There was venison and beef and everything else you could imag-

ine, and there was both pie and cake for dessert. The cake was decorated with hearts in red icing. We ate till we couldn't hold any more and then had the pie and cake.

I don't like cake. I left my piece on the plate and watched the others. Old Henry was a slow eater. He hadn't got to the dessert stage when little Tom made a break. He tried to grab a piece of cake and his mother slapped his hand.

"Just for that, you don't get any," she said.

I wanted to tell her to let him have a piece, but I didn't. I've always been glad too. Old Henry pushed his plate back and said he didn't believe he could eat another bite, and the women started redding up the table. They hadn't eaten with us, just carried grub and watched. We went out into the bunkroom and stretched out to digest and smoke.

Pretty soon, Bigbee said, "I've got a cramp, boys. I reckon I ate too much."

Morris said, "I feel kind of funny myself."

Nothing more happened for a while, then one of the camp men sat up and grabbed his middle and let out a scream. That brought the women running from the kitchen. The camp man got up and began to stagger, stiff-legged. He acted like the dogs that had got my strychnine bait. Every man was groaning now and trying to move. And Riordan began to laugh.

"You'll die!" he screamed. "You'll all die!" And he spat out a wad of Sioux.

I knew what he'd done, and started for him. He gave a screeching yell, snatched up his rifle and took a shot at me. I dropped when I saw the gun, and he must have thought he'd hit me, for he didn't shoot again, just jerked open the door and ran out.

When I got to the door, he was gone and there wasn't time to chase him. I had to do something for the men.

and do it quick. Zoe came in with a bucket of melted grease, and we started to stuff it down those fellows.

Mrs. Mayhew helped at first, talking all the time. It was the cake, she said; it must have been the cake, because she'd gone out of the kitchen for a minute when she was ready to put it in the pans. That must have been when Riordan dumped in the poison. I wasn't so interested in when it happened as I was in getting lard into the men.

Right in the middle of the business, Henry Mayhew came in. "You come with me, Mrs. Mayhew!" he said. "You come with me! I've got a wagon hitched, and I'm going to take my family away from this place!"

"You grab holt here and help," I told him. "You can't leave now."

He didn't even listen. He caught his wife's arm and dragged her out. I ran to the door, and I'll be darned if he didn't have a team hitched to the ranch wagon, and Lola and Tom were carrying stuff out of their dugout. I didn't have time but for one look, because Zoe called me to help her with Bates. But I did hear the wagon roll off after a while.

We got the lard into them, and we got them emptied out. Likely the big meal was what saved them, at that. I've seen sick men since, but I've never seen men sick equal to those. And we nearly lost Morris. There was twice I thought he was done for, but Zoe wouldn't give him up.

By dark we had it licked. There were eight mighty sick but living men in the bunkroom. Zoe and I stood in the kitchen, both of us weak and tired.

"As soon as I can," I told her, "I'll go after Riordan. He'll never get away from me. No matter where he goes, I'll follow."

Zoe shook her head. Her eyes were big as half dollars and she was just worn out. "No," she said.



"I will, too," I said. "I'll follow him to hell if I have to, and I'll get him!"

"No," she said again. "You'll not follow him. He'll come back."

"He ain't crazy," I said. "He tried to poison us all just to get even with me, but he ain't crazy. He won't come back here. What makes you think he will?"

"Do you remember the wolf he caught?" she said. "Do you remember how he caught the wolf?"

Of course I remembered. "Sure," I said, "but what's that got to do with him coming back?"

"He is like that wolf," Zoe said. "He will come back because he wants me. I know." She wasn't very big, but she lifted her head and stood there, looking tall. "I know," she said, "because his blood is the same as mine."

"Then we'll get ready for him," I said, and went into the bunkroom.

When I came back to the kitchen, Zoe was in her room in the dark. I put out the kitchen lamp and sat down. We waited.

We waited a long time. I could hear the clock tick in the dark, and sometimes I thought I heard something else, but I didn't. When it seemed I couldn't wait any longer, the back door of the kitchen began to open. The kitchen was black dark. Outside it was only gray dark. The door opened wide, and I didn't see a thing.

Then I heard Riordan say, "Zoe."

He waited and I waited.

He said, "Zoe," again, just a whisper.

"I'm here," she said. And he stepped into the doorway, full against the gray outside.

THE CAPTAIN came out in May, almost before the snow was off. I'd written to him, of course, but I had to tell it over again when he came.

"That's what I get," he said, "for breaking my own

rules and interfering with the other man's business. I told you breeds were no good, Jebbs. They've got wolf blood in 'em."

"What about Zoe?" I asked.

He looked straight at me, and that was the only time I ever heard him swear. "Hell!" he said. "You ought to marry that girl, son!"

"That's what I thought," I said. "So I did."

*Nobody dared question his manners!*

## A GENTLEMAN OF LA PORTE

BRET HARTE

HE WAS also a Pioneer. A party who broke through the snows of the winter of '51, and came upon the triangular little valley afterwards known as La Porte, found him the sole inhabitant. He had subsisted for three months on two biscuits a day and a few inches of bacon, in a hut made of bark and brushwood. Yet, when the explorers found him, he was quite alert, hopeful, and gentlemanly. But I cheerfully make way here for the terser narrative of Captain Henry Symes, commanding the prospecting party:

"We kem upon him, gentlemen, suddent-like, jest abreast of a rock like this"—demonstrating the distance—"ez near ez you be. He sees us, and he dives into his cabin and comes out ag'in with a *tall hat*,—a stovepipe, gentlemen,—and, blank me! gloves! He was a tall, thin feller, holler in the cheek,—ez might be,—and off color in his face, ez was nat'ral, takin' in account his starvation grub. But he lifts his hat to us, so, and sez he, 'Happy to make your acquaintance, gentlemen! I'm afraid you ex-peri-

enced some difficulty in getting here. Take a cigar.' And he pulls out a fancy cigar-case with two real Havanas in it. 'I wish there was more,' sez he.

" 'Ye don't smoke yourself?' sez I.

" 'Seldom,' sez he; which was a lie, for that very arternoon I seed him hangin' ontu a short pipe like a suckin' baby ontu a bottle. 'I kept these cigyars for any gentleman that might drop in.'

" 'I reckon ye see a great deal o' the best society, yer,' sez Bill Parker, starin' at the hat and gloves and winkin' at the boys.

" 'A few Ind-i-ans occasionally,' sez he.

" 'Injins!' sez we.

" 'Yes. Very quiet good fellows in their way. They have once or twice brought me game, which I refused, as the poor fellows have had a pretty hard time of it themselves.'

" 'Now, gentlemen, we was, ez you know, rather quiet men—rather peaceable men; but—heyin' been shot at three times by these yar 'good' Injins, and Parker hisself havin' a matter o' three inches of his own skelp lying loose in their hands and he walkin' round wearin' green leaves on his head like a Roman statoo—it *did* kinder seem ez if this yer stranger was playin' it rather low down on the boys. Bill Parker gets up and takes a survey o' him, and sez he, peaceful-like—

" 'Ye say these yer Injins—these yer *quiet* Injins—of-fered yer game?'

" 'They did!' sez he.

" 'And you refoosed?'

" 'I did,' sez he.

" 'Must hev made 'em feel kinder bad—sorter tortured their sensitiv' naters?' sez Bill.

" 'They really seemed quite disappointed.'

" 'In course,' sez Bill. 'And now mout I ask who you be?'

" 'Excuse me,' says the stranger; and, darn my skin! If

he doesn't hist out a keerd-case, and, handin' it over to Bill sez, 'Here's my kyard.'

"Bill took it and read it aloud, 'J. Trott, Kentucky.'

"'It's a pooty keerd,' sez Bill.

"'I'm glad you like it,' says the stranger.

"'I reckon the other fifty-one of the deck ez as pooty—all of 'em Jacks and left bowers,' sez Bill.

"'The stranger sez nothin', but kinder draws back from Bill; but Bill ups and sez—

"'Wot is your little game, Mister J. Trott, of Kentucky?'

"'I don't think I quite understand you,' sez the stranger, a holler fire comin' intu his cheeks like ez if they was the bowl of a pipe.

"'Wot's this yer kid-glove business?—this yer tall hat paradin'?—this yer circus foolin'? Wot's it all about? *Who* are ye, anyway?'

"The stranger stands up, and sez he, 'Ez I don't quarrel with guests on my own land,' sez he, 'I think you'll allow I'm—a gentleman!' sez he.

"With that he takes off his tall hat and makes a low bow, so, and turns away—like this; but Bill lites out of a suddent with his right foot and drives his No. 10 boot clean through the crown of that tall hat like one o' them circus hoops.

"That's about ez fur ez I remember. Gentlemen! thar wa'n't but *one* man o' that hull crowd ez could actooally swear what happened next, and that man never told. For a kind o' whirlwind jest then took place in that valley. I disremember anythin' but dust and bustlin'. Thar wasn't no yellin', thar wasn't no shootin'. It was one o' them suddent things that left even a sixshooter out in the cold. When I kem to in the *chapparel*—bein' oncomfortable like from hevin' only a half shirt on—I found nigh on three pounds o' gravel and stones in my pockets and a

stiffness in my ha'r. I looks up and sees Bill hangin' in the forks of a hickory saplin' twenty feet above me.

" 'Cap,' sez he, in an inquirin' way, 'hez the tornado passed?'

" 'Which?' sez I.

" 'This yer elemental disturbance—is it over?'

" 'I reckon,' sez I.

" 'Because,' sez he, 'afore this yer electrical phenomenon took place I hed a slight misunderstanding with a stranger, and I'd like to apologize!'

"And with that he climbs down, peaceful-like, and goes into the shanty, and comes out, hand in hand with that stranger, smilin' like an infant. And that's the first time, I reckon, we know'd anythin' about the gentleman of La Porte."

It is by no means improbable that the above incidents are slightly exaggerated in narration, and the cautious reader will do well to accept with some reservation the particular phenomenon alluded to by the Captain. But the fact remains that the Gentleman of La Porte was allowed an eccentricity and enjoyed an immunity from contemporaneous criticism only to be attributed to his personal prowess. Indeed, this was once publicly expressed. "It 'pears to me," said a meek newcomer,—who, on the strength of his having received news of the death of a distant relative in the "States," had mounted an exceedingly large crape mourning-band on his white felt hat, and was consequently obliged to "treat" the crowd in the barroom of Parker's Hotel,— "it 'pears to me, gentlemen, that this yer taxin' the nat'ral expression of grief, and allowin' such festive exhibitions as yaller kid gloves, on the gentleman on my right, is sorter inconsistent. I don't mind treatin' the crowd, gentlemen, but this yer platform and resolutions don't seem to keep step."

This appeal to the *Demos* of every American crowd, of

course, precluded any reply from the Gentleman of La Porte, but left it to the palpable chairman—the bar-keeper, Mr. William Parker.

"Young man," he replied severely, "*when* ye can wear yaller kids like *that* man and make 'em hover in the air like summer lightnin', and strike in four places to onct!—*then* ye kin talk! *Then* ye kin wear your shirt half-masted if ye like!" A sentiment to which the crowd assenting, the meek man paid for the drinks, and would have, in addition, taken off his mourning-band, but was courteously stopped by the Gentleman of La Porte.

And yet, I protest, there was little suggestive of this baleful prowess in his face and figure. He was loose-jointed and long-limbed, yet with a certain mechanical, slow rigidity of movement that seemed incompatible with alacrity and dexterity. His arms were unusually long, and his hands hung with their palms forward. In walking, his feet "toed in," suggesting an aboriginal ancestry. His face, as I remember it, was equally inoffensive. Thin and melancholy, the rare smile that lit it up was only a courteous reception of some attribute of humor in another which he was unable himself to appreciate. His straight black hair and high cheekbones would have heightened his Indian resemblance; but these were offset by two most extraordinary eyes that were utterly at variance with this, or, indeed, any other, suggestion of his features. They were yellowish-blue, globular, and placidly staring. They expressed nothing that the Gentleman of La Porte thought—nothing that he did—nothing that he might reasonably be expected to do. They were at variance with his speech, his carriage, even his remarkable attire. More than one irreverent critic had suggested that he had probably lost his own eyes in some frontier difficulty, and had hurriedly replaced them with those of his antagonist.

Had this ingenious hypothesis reached the ears of the Gentleman, he would probably have contented himself with a simple denial of the fact, overlooking any humorous incongruity of statement. For, as has been already intimated, among his other privileges he enjoyed an absolute immunity from any embarrassing sense of the ludicrous. His deficient sense of humor and habitual gravity, in a community whose severest dramatic episodes were mitigated by some humorous detail, and whose customary relaxation was the playing of practical jokes, was marked with a certain frankness that was discomposing. "I think," he remarked to a well-known citizen of La Porte, "that, in alluding to the argumentative character of Mr. William Peghammer, you said you had found him lying awake at night contradicting the 'Katydids.' This he himself assures me is not true, and I may add that I passed the night with him in the woods without any such thing occurring. You seem to have *lied*." The severity of this reception checked further humorous exhibitions in his presence. Indeed, I am not certain but it invested him with a certain aristocratic isolation.

Thus identified with the earliest history of the Camp, Mr. Trott participated in its fortunes and shared its prosperity. As one of the original locators of the "Eagle Mine" he enjoyed a certain income which enabled him to live without labor and to freely indulge his few and inexpensive tastes. After his own personal adornment—which consisted chiefly in the daily wearing of spotless linen—he was fond of giving presents. These possessed, perhaps, a sentimental rather than intrinsic value. To an intimate friend he had once given a cane, the stick whereof was cut from a wild grapevine which grew above the spot where the famous "Eagle lead" was first discovered in La Porte; the head originally belonged to a cane presented to Mr. Trott's father, and the ferrule was made

of the last silver half-dollar which he had brought to California. "And yet, do you know," said the indignant recipient of this touching gift, "I offered to put it down for a five-dollar ante last night over at Robinson's, and the boys wouldn't see it, and allowed I'd better leave the board. Thar's no appreciation of sacred things in this yer Camp."

It was in this lush growth and springtime of La Porte that the Gentleman was chosen Justice of the Peace by the unanimous voice of his fellow-citizens. That he should have exercised his functions with dignity was natural; that he should have shown a singular lenity in the levying of fines and the infliction of penalties was, however, an unexpected and discomposing discovery to the settlement.

"The law requires me, sir," he would say to some unmistakable culprit, "to give you the option of ten days' imprisonment or the fine of ten dollars. If you have not the money with you, the clerk will doubtless advance it for you." It is needless to add that the clerk invariably advanced the money, or that when the Court adjourned the Judge instantly reimbursed him. In one instance only did the sturdy culprit—either from "pure cussedness" or a weaker desire to spare the Judge the expense of his conviction—*refuse* to borrow the amount of the fine from the clerk. He was accordingly remanded to the County Jail. It is related—on tolerably good authority—that when the Court had adjourned the Court was seen, in spotless linen and yellow gloves, making in the direction of the County Jail—a small *adobe* building, which also served as a Hall of Records; that, after ostentatiously consulting certain records, the Court entered the Jail as if in casual official inspection; that, later in the evening, the Deputy Sheriff having charge of the prisoner was dispatched for a bottle of whisky and a pack of cards. But as the story here al-



leges that the Deputy, that evening, lost the amount of his month's stipend and the Court its entire yearly salary to the prisoner, in a friendly game of "cut-throat euchre," to relieve the tedium of the prisoner's confinement, the whole story has been denied, as incompatible with Judge Trott's dignity, though not inconsistent with his kindness of nature.

It is certain, however, that his lenity would have brought him into disfavor but for a redeeming exhibition of his unofficial strength. A young and talented lawyer from Sacramento had been detained in some civil case before Judge Trott, but, confident of his success on appeal from this primitive tribunal, he had scarcely concealed his contempt for it in his closing argument. Judge Trott, when he had finished, sat unmoved save for a slight coloring of his high cheekbones. But here I must again borrow the graphic language of a spectator: "When the Judge had hung out them air red danger signals he sez, quite peaceful-like, to that yer Sacramento Shrimp, sez he, 'Young gentleman,' sez he, 'do you know that I could fine ye fifty dollars for contempt o' Court?' 'And if ye could,' sez the shrimp, peart and sassy as a bossfly, 'I reckon I could pay it.' 'But I ought to add,' sez the Gentleman, sad-like, 'that I don't purpose to do it. I believe in freedom of speech and—action!' He then rises up, on-limbers hisself, so to speak, stretches out that yer Hand o' Providence o' his, lites into that yer shrimp, lifts him up and scoots him through the window twenty feet into the ditch. 'Call the next case,' sez he, sittin' down again, with them big white eyes o' his looking peaceful-like ez if nothin' partikler had happened."

Happy would it have been for the Gentleman had these gentle eccentricities produced no greater result. But a fatal and hitherto unexpected weakness manifested itself in the very court in which he had triumphed, and

for a time imperiled his popularity. A lady of dangerous antecedents and great freedom of manner, who was the presiding goddess of the "Wheel of Fortune" in the principal gambling-saloon of La Porte, brought an action against several of its able-bodied citizens for entering the saloon with "force and arms" and destroying the peculiar machinery of her game. She was ably supported by counsel, and warmly sympathized with by a gentleman who was not her husband. Yet in spite of this valuable coöperation she was not successful. The offense was clearly proved; but the jury gave a verdict in favor of the *defendants*, without leaving their seats.

Judge Trott turned his mild, inoffensive eyes upon them.

"Do I understand you to say that this is your final verdict?"

"You kin bet your boots, Your Honor," responded the foreman with cheerful but well-meaning irreverence, "that that's about the way the thing points."

"Mr. Clerk," said Judge Trott, "record the verdict, and then enter my resignation as Judge of this court."

He rose and left the bench. In vain did various influential citizens follow him with expostulations; in vain did they point out the worthlessness of the plaintiff and the worthlessness of her cause—in which he had sacrificed himself. In vain did the jury intimate that his resignation was an insult to *them*. Judge Trott turned abruptly upon the foreman, with the old ominous glow in his high cheek-bones.

"I didn't understand you," he said.

"I was saying," said the foreman hastily, "that it was useless to argue the case any longer." And withdrew slightly in advance of the rest of the jury, as became his official position. But Judge Trott never again ascended the bench.

It was quite a month after his resignation, and the Gentleman was sitting in the twilight "under the shadow of his own vine and fig tree,"—a figure of speech locally interpreted as a "giant redwood" and a mossy creeper,—before the door of that cabin in which he was first introduced to the reader,—when he was faintly conscious of the outlines of a female form and the tones of a female voice.

The Gentleman hesitated, and placed over his right eye a large gold eyeglass, which had been lately accepted by the Camp as his most recent fashionable folly. The form was unfamiliar, but the voice the Gentleman instantly recognized as belonging to the plaintiff in his late momentous judicial experience. It is proper to say here that it was the voice of Mademoiselle Clotilde Montmorency; it is only just to add that, speaking no French, and being of unmistakable Anglo-Saxon origin, her name was evidently derived from the game over which she had presided, which was, in the baleful estimation of the Camp, of foreign extraction.

"I wanted to know," said Miss Clotilde, sitting down on a bench beside the Gentleman—"that is, me and Jake Woods thought we'd like to know—*how much* you consider yourself out of pocket by this yer resignation of yours?"

Scarcely hearing the speech, and more concerned with the apparition itself, Judge Trott stammered vaguely, "I have the pleasure of addressing Miss——"

"If you mean by that that you think you don't know me, never saw me before, and don't want to see me ag'in, why, I reckon that's the polite way o' putting it," said Miss Montmorency, with enforced calmness, scraping some dead leaves together with the tip of her parasol as if she were covering up her emotions. "But I'm Miss Montmorency. I was saying that Jake and me thought

that—seein' as you stood by us when them hounds on the jury give in their hellish lying verdict—Jake and me thought it wasn't the square thing for you to lose your situation just for me. 'Find out from the Judge,' sez he, 'jist what he reckons he's lost by this yer resignation—putting it at his own figgers.' That's what Jake said. Jake's a square man—I kin say *that* of him, anyhow."

"I don't think I understand you," said Judge Trott simply.

"That's it! That's just it!" continued Miss Clotilde, with only half-suppressed bitterness. "That's what I told Jake. I sez, 'The Judge won't understand you nor me. He's that proud he won't have anything to say to us. Didn't he meet me square on the street last Tuesday and never let on that he saw me—never even nodded when I nodded to him?' "

"My dear madam," said Judge Trott hurriedly, "I assure you you are mistaken. I did *not* see you. Pray believe me. The fact is—I am afraid to confess it even to myself—but I find that, day by day, my eyesight is growing weaker and weaker." He stopped and sighed.

Miss Montmorency, glancing upward at his face, saw it was pale and agitated. With a woman's swift intuition, she believed this weakness explained the otherwise gratuitous effrontery of his incongruous eyes, and it was to her a sufficient apology. It is only the inexplicable in a man's ugliness that a woman never pardons.

"Then ye really don't recognize me?" said Miss Clotilde, a little softened, and yet a little uneasy.

"I—am—afraid—not," said Trott, with an apologetic smile.

Miss Clotilde paused. "Do you mean to say you couldn't see me when I was in court during the trial?"

Judge Trott blushed. "I am afraid I saw only—an—outline."

"I had on," continued Miss Clotilde rapidly, "a straw hat, with magenta silk lining, turned up so—magenta ribbons tied here"—indicating her round throat—"a reg'lar 'Frisco hat—don't you remember?"

"I—that is—I am afraid——"

"And one of them figgered silk 'Dollar Vardens,'" continued Miss Clotilde anxiously.

Judge Trott smiled politely, but vaguely. Miss Clotilde saw that he evidently had not recognized this rare and becoming costume. She scattered the leaves again and dug her parasol into the ground.

"Then you never saw me at all?"

"Never distinctly."

"Ef it's a fair question betwixt you and me," she said suddenly, "what made you resign?"

"I could not remain Judge of a court that was obliged to record a verdict so unjust as that given by the jury in your case," replied Judge Trott warmly.

"Say that ag'in, old man," said Miss Clotilde, with an admiration which half apologized for the irreverence of epithet.

Judge Trott urbanely repeated the substance of his remark in another form.

Miss Montmorency was silent a moment. "Then it wasn't *me*?" she said finally.

"I don't think I catch your meaning," replied the Judge, a little awkwardly.

"Why—ME. It wasn't on account of *me* you did it?"

"No," said the Judge pleasantly.

There was another pause. Miss Montmorency balanced her parasol on the tip of her toe. "Well," she said finally, "this isn't getting much information for Jake."

"For whom?"

"Jake."

"Oh—your husband?"

Miss Montmorency clicked the snap of her bracelet smartly on her wrist and said sharply, "Who said he was 'my husband?'"

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"I said Jake Woods. He's a square man—I can say *that* for him. He sez to me, 'You kin tell the Judge that whatever he chooses to take from us—it ain't no bribery nor corruption, nor nothin' o' that kind. It's all on the square. The trial's over; he isn't Judge any longer; he can't do anything for us—he ain't expected to do anything for us but one thing. And that is to give us the satisfaction of knowing that he hasn't lost anything by us—that he hasn't lost anything by being a square man and acting on the square.' There! that's what he said. I've said it! Of course I know what *you'll* say. I know you'll get wrathful. I know you're mad now! I know you're too proud to touch a dollar from the like of us—if you were starving. I know you'll tell Jake to go to hell, and me with him! And who the hell cares?"

She had worked herself up to this passion so suddenly, so outrageously and inconsistently, that it was not strange that it ended in an hysterical burst of equally illogical tears. She sank down again on the bench she had gradually risen from, and applied the backs of her yellow-gloved hands to her eyes, still holding the parasol at a rigid angle with her face. To her infinite astonishment Judge Trott laid one hand gently upon her shoulder and with the other possessed himself of the awkward parasol, which he tactfully laid on the bench beside her.

"You are mistaken, my dear young lady," he said, with a respectful gravity,—"*deeply* mistaken, if you think I feel anything but kindness and gratitude for your offer—an offer so kind and unusual that even you yourself feel that I could not accept it. No! Let me believe that in doing what I thought was only my duty as a *Judge*, I gained

your good-will, and let me feel that in doing my duty now as a *man*. I shall still keep it."

Miss Clotilde had lifted her face towards his, as if deeply and wonderingly following his earnest words. But she only said, "Can you see me in this light?—at this distance? Put up your glass and try."

Her face was not far from his. I have forgotten whether I have said she was a pretty woman. She had been once prettier. But she retained enough of her good looks to invest the "Wheel of Fortune," over which she had presided, with a certain seductive and bewildering uncertainty, which increased the risk of the players. It was, in fact, this unhallowed combination of Beauty and Chance that excited the ire of La Porte—who deemed it unprofessional and not "on the square."

She had fine eyes. Possibly Judge Trott had never before been so near eyes that were so fine and so—expressive. He lifted his head with some embarrassment and a blush on his high cheek-bones. Then, partly from instinctive courtesy, partly from a desire to bring in a third party to relieve his embarrassment, he said—

"I hope you will make your friend, Mr.—, understand that I appreciate his kindness, even if I can't accept it."

"Oh, you mean Jake," said the lady. "Oh, *he's* gone home to the States. I'll make it all right with *him!*"

There was another embarrassing pause—possibly over the absence of Jake. At last it was broken by Miss Montmorency. "You must take care of your eyes, for I want you to know me the next time you see me."

So they parted. The Judge *did* recognize her on several other occasions. And then La Porte was stirred to its depths in hillside and tunnel with a strange rumor. Judge Trott had married Miss Jane Thomson, *alias* Miss Clotilde Montmorency—in San Francisco! For a few hours a storm of indignation and rage swept over the town: it

was believed to have been a deep-laid plan and conspiracy. It was perfectly well understood that Judge Trott's resignation was the price of her hand—and of the small fortune she was known to be possessed of. Of his character nothing remained that was assailable. A factitious interest and pathos were imported into the character and condition of her last lover—Jake Woods—the victim of the double treachery of Judge Trott and Miss Clotilde. A committee was formed to write a letter of sympathy to this man, who, a few months before, had barely escaped lynching at their hands. The angry discussion was at last broken by the voice of the first speaker in this veracious narrative, Captain Henry Symes—

"Thar's one feature in this yer case that ye don't seem to know, and that oughter be considered. The day she married him in San Francisco she had just come from the doctor's, who had told her that Trott was *helplessly blind*! Gentlemen, when a gal like that throws over her whole life, her whole perfession, and a square man like Jake Woods, to marry a blind man without a dollar—just because he once stood up for her—*on principle*, damn me ef I see any man good enough to go back on her for it! Ef the Judge is willing to kinder overlook little by-gone eccentricities o' hers for the sake o' being cared for and looked arter by her, that's his lookout! And you'll excoose me if, arter my experience, I reckon it ain't exactly a healthy business to interfere with the domestic concerns of the Gentleman of La Porte."



*He had to seek a short cut*

## MASSACRE

JAMES WARNER BELLAH

THE WIND was out of the east, and there can be a great restlessness of soul in the east wind—a ghost shuffle of unfulfilled promise. Flintridge Cohill awakened quickly all over, and lay quite still from long habit, until it came back to him that he was safe in his own quarters at Fort Starke. He snaked out a hand to his repeater and pressed the ring-back release. The watch struck three quarters of an hour past three o'clock. And as the soft bell sang in the darkness, Flint was a little boy again, watching his father, the captain, come angrily up the path to their quarters at Sackets Harbor, seven years before Sumter, push open the door and fling his cap to the rosewood table in the hall. "Molly, they've finally got Grant. He's resigned . . . for the good of the service!" Why should those things come back years later? Some friend of his father's. Some captain out at Fort Humboldt. A brother officer who had fought at Contreras and Chapultepec with his father.

Flint sat upright in bed. "Good God, I'll bet that was General Grant!" he said out loud, and he snorted. "And at a quarter before four in the morning twenty years later, what difference does it make if it was?" Then he heard the distant staccato of feet running.

Someone's boots pounding the headquarters' duckboards. The sound bounced clearly across the parade ground to the row, on the east wind. In a moment, Fire Call would sound or someone would bawl for the corpo-

ral of the guard. Cohill flung out of bed and went out on his lean-to veranda. There was a carriage standing across the parade ground in the darkness by headquarters. A carriage with restless horses and dry axles.

*It'll be twenty years more before I get within shooting distance of general officer's stars—like Grant and the Old Man—and by that time I won't care. It won't be nearly as important as making captain, in a few more years. But I'd like to be a general before I die—the best damned general in the world at the right time and the right place! It's only the middle of the month and that's a paymaster's wagon over there. I can see the glass glint silver in the starlight like a sheet of bucket-flung water.*

Cohill was pulling on cold breeches and stiff boots, and his teeth were chattering in the east wind; he was running fast and silently through the living darkness of the parade ground, with somewhere in the cellars of his mind the nasty-sounding name of Custis Meacham, Indian agent at White River. What are those tricks of association?

Feet raced toward him. He pivoted with flung arms, bending down to silhouette whoever it was against the lighter darkness of the sky. "Brailey?"

Brailey came toward him. "Mr. Cohill, sir, I got orders to call you and Mr. Sitterding and Mr. Topliff. You're wanted at post headquarters, sir."

And Cohill said, "What's the paymaster's wagon got to do with it, Brailey?"

Brailey said, "The new post commander arrived in the wagon. Drove all night from Indian Wells."

Owen Thursday was a tall man, dried out to leather and bone and sinew. Whatever he was doing, he moved about incessantly, not with nerves, but with primeval restlessness; not with impatience, but with an echo of lost destiny. Brevet Major General Thursday, of Clarke's Corps—Thursday of Cumberland Station and of Sudler's

Mountain, at twenty-six. Now a major of cavalry at thirty-eight, back in the slow Army runway again, with the flame of glory burning low on his horizon ("I don't know what you were in the habit of doing under similar circumstances when you commanded your division, major, but as long as you have a battalion in my regiment, you will —") for it is far worse to go up and come back again than it ever is not to go up at all. And the cities of the world should always be a vision. For few men can walk their streets and come back to live at peace with their souls in the quietude of their own villages.

"Lieutenant Cohill, sir,"—the dark was alive and prowling, like a large cat. There was cool dampness in it, and the faint whisper of threat. A horse whinnied in screaming soprano. Close to, when the team moved the paymaster's wagon, its glass windows flashed black, like polished ebony in the starlight.

"You got here damned fast, Cohill. Where's the acting post commander? Do you all sleep with the covers over your heads at Fort Starke?"

There were booted feet on the veranda boards of headquarters. Inside, someone cursed persistently over the lighting of a lamp. Bitter wood smoke fanned low from a chimney lip and stained the smell of the white dawn air to gray. "Your father, General Cohill, asked me to convey his affection to you, Cohill, when I left Washington."

"Thank you, general."

"Not 'general,'" Thursday said sharply. "A man is what he's paid for. I'm paid in the rank of major."

"Yes, sir. I remembered you as General Thursday."

Then Joplyn came sprinting down the duckboards and braked himself to a quick stop. "Captain Joplyn, sir, acting in command."

"Joplyn," Thursday said, "I've come all the way in from Indian Wells on the whip and two wheels. Mr. Meacham, the agent at White River, wants a show of

strength up there at once. He's afraid Stone Buffalo will get out of hand without it."

"Stone Buffalo has been out of hand for months. He is trying to see how far Meacham's religious sentiment will let him go, sir. And Meacham is the biggest fool west of Kansas City and the biggest liar. I'll get a half company off by reveille. I'll take it up myself."

"I call it to your attention that Mr. Meacham is an agent of the United States Government. You will get two companies and an escort wagon train off before reveille, Captain Joplyn. And I'll take them up to White River myself. I've had the officer of the guard send a runner to knock out Mr. Sitterding and Mr. Topliff. Mr. Cohill has already reported in. I'd like all three of them with me, for I know their names and records from department files. And I suggest you keep an officer at headquarters in future—on night duty—until I get back to take over command formally. I don't like daylight soldiers."

"Yes, sir." Joplyn turned sharp about to Flint Cohill with no change of voice, no strain in his manner. "Mr. Cohill, pass the word at once to A and B. Turn them to. Full field equipment, and three hundred rounds of carbine ammunition per man. You will take eight escort wagons, rations and forage for fifteen days, and half of C as mounted wagon guards."

"That is a lot of ammunition . . . for men who are supposed to be trained to shoot," Major Thursday said. "One hundred rounds per man should be ample for any emergency."

"One hundred rounds of carbine ammunition per man, Mr. Cohill. Fifty rounds for revolving pistols per pistol. Sitterding commands A. Topliff, B. You command the escort train. It is twenty minutes after four. How soon can you move out, Mr. Cohill?"

"Reveille is five-forty-five. We can pass the head of the column through the main gate at five-thirty, sir. When Topliff and Sitterding get here, will you tell them I shall be forming the train in the area in front of the cavalry stables? They can find me there. Their first sergeants will know everything you've told me. . . . Brailey, follow me on the double as runner." Flint Cohill then turned sharp about to Thursday. "Have you anything additional, sir?"

"Yes, I've several things. I've a few ideas of my own on how Indians should be dealt with. I shall want colors and a proper color guard, guidons and trumpeters. Have the men bring their polishing kits and button sticks and boot blacking. A little more military dignity and decorum out here, and a little less cowboy manners and dress, will engender a lot more respect for the Army. I'll meet you here to take over command, Cohill, as the column passes. You will act as adjutant, in addition to your other duties. Officers' Call in the saddle on the march for further orders as soon as the tail clears the post. Questions."

"Nothing, sir."

"Move out."

The sun in August is a molten saber blade. It will burn the neckline and the back of a hand to blistered uselessness as you watch it. It sears the lower lip into stiff scar tissue and sweats up shirts and beltlines into noisome sog-giness while you stand still. The column was headed due north to make a crossing of the upper reaches of the Paradise, girths frothed white, saddles hot damp, hat brims low, and the blue of trousers and shirts faded out to Southern gray with the dust silt that blanketed everything except eyeballs and the undersides of tongues.

Owen Thursday rode alone, off to the right of the leading files, where he could turn and look down the strung-out length with the faint echo in his eyes of larger columns he had commanded—of regiments of infantry with

colors and field music; of artillery rolling inexorably in its heavy dust, hames taut and chains growling, wheels slithering in ruts with the protesting sound of cracking balk ends; of cavalry flank guards flung far out on his right and left by battalion.

All of which dissolved into a hundred and nine officers and men and eight escort wagons—as big a detachment as Mr. Cohill or Mr. Topliff or Mr. Sitterding had ever taken on the warpath in all their service.

"Mr. Cohill!"

Flint kneed out of column and put his horse to the gallop and rode in on Major Thursday's near side.

Thursday said, "Move down the column and have every man crease his hat fore and aft as a fedora. The front of the brim may be snapped downward as eye protection, but all the rest of the brim will be turned up. The hat will sit squarely on the head. Look at them, Mr. Cohill! They look like scratch farmers on market day! The hat is a uniform, not a subject for individual whimsical expression!"

Thursday had a point ahead and flankers out on either side and a tiny rear guard with a warning mission only, but somehow it seemed more like a maneuver—a problem—than it did a march into hostile territory. D'Arcy Topliff, heading up B, never knew where the thought came from. But it was there suddenly from something he'd read years before or heard someone say: The major has fewer years left to live than he has lived already, and when that knowledge hits a man's mind, he can break easily. He must hurry then, for his time is shortening. He must seek short cuts. And, seeking them, he may destroy the worth of his decisions, the power of his judgment. Only a solid character with a fine sense of balance can face the fewer years as they shrink ahead, and go on into them with complacent courage, all the way to the Door.

Flint Cohill, with the wagons and head down to the dust, thought, *Damn it, this isn't a ceremonial detail of the First City Troop turned out for a governor's funeral. He's got the men disliking him from the start, deliberately, for picayune cause.*

And then Flint remembered a name brought into conversation at a reception once, and he likewise remembered old Gen. Malcolm Hamilton's grave bow.

"Madame, only four officers in the Army know the facts of that incident, but none of them will talk as long as the colonel's widow lives."

Three days north of Fort Starke, the detachment went into bivouac on the high ground above the headwaters of Crazy Man Creek, which is the south branch of White River, and a little under thirty miles from the agency. The commanding officer sent Clay Sitterding on ahead to scout and contact Custis Meacham, the agent.

Clay rode back in, about sundown. "Stone Buffalo is camped at the junction of White River and Crazy Man, sir, in the chevron the fork makes. His camp is about a week old. From three hundred to three hundred and fifty people, all told. Most of them warriors and dog soldiers. No women and children. It's a war camp. There are scouting parties all the way along between us."

"You contacted Meacham, Mr. Sitterding?"

"I did, sir. He professes to have Stone Buffalo's complete confidence. Stone Buffalo has attempted to have himself accepted as medicine chief as well as war chief of all his nation. Running Calf contested the claim and took the Red Hill people and left the reservation. Stone Buffalo followed him to force him back into the fold. Mr. Meacham sent for us to stop the two factions from warring, but the last four days seem to have settled the argument peaceably."

Major Thursday's lip thinned. "In other words, as

soon as the Indians knew troops were on the way, they decided to behave."

"That could be it, sir. Stone Buffalo would like to smoke with you. Mr. Meacham requests it. I strongly advise against letting Indians into our camp. It will not be advisable to let them know any more about our strength than they do now."

"When I want advice from my officers, Mr. Sitterding, I ask for it. Will you remember that, please?"

The smell of an Indian is resinous and salty and rancid. It is the wood smoke of his tepee and the fetidity of his breath that comes of eating body-hot animal entrails. It is his uncured tobacco and the sweat of his unwashed body. It is animal grease in his hair and old leather and fur, tanned with bird lime and handed down unclear from ancestral bodies long since gathered to the Happy Lands.

Major Thursday saw their impassive Judaic faces, their dignity, their reserve. He felt the quiet impact of their silence, but, being new to the game, he had no way of knowing that they drew all of it on as they drew on their trade-goods blankets—to cover a childish curiosity and the excitability of terriers. Stone Buffalo. Black Dog. Pony that Runs. Running Calf. Eagle Claw. Chiefs of tribes in the sovereign nation of Stone Buffalo—a nation under treaty of peace with the United States. A nation, in effect, held as prisoners of war, so that it would keep that peace.

Custis Meacham was painfully nearsighted and frighteningly short of breath. It was necessary for him to gasp wide-mouthed when he spoke. His hands were damp in the palms and restless. His fingernails were concave, like the bowls of small blue spoons. He sat with the skirts of his greasy Prince Albert draped across his pendulous abdomen.

The pipe went solemnly around to the left, each man



pulling it red until his cheeks ached, drawing in its raw smoke until his lungs were stifled.

Custis Meacham coughed himself red-eyed and completely breathless. "Oh, dear," he said. "I can't stand to be near them when they smoke. I trust that you don't indulge in the vice for pleasure, Mr. Thursday?"

"I do, constantly," Thursday said. "And I am Major Thursday, Mr. Meacham, not Mr. Thursday."

"God bless you, I pay no attention whatever to military titles. I don't believe in titles of any kind. You can see from their faces and actions, as they pass the pipe, that they have settled all their troubles peaceably among themselves. Thanks be to God. You can take all your soldiers straight back tomorrow. What is your church, please?"

Owen Thursday looked long at Custis Meacham. He said, "You put in a request for this detachment, but that does not put you in command of it. Any further action on your part will be made through the same channel you used for the original request—direct to departmental headquarters. I am a back-slidden Presbyterian, Mr. Meacham. I intend to remain one."

"You cannot tell me what to do," Custis Meacham's voice was shrill. "I am quite used to the way the Army does things! When I was secretary of the International Bible Association, I once told General Scott——"

Flint Cohill touched the major's arm. "Stone Buffalo is going to speak, sir," and, after a moment, Stone Buffalo rose. He talked and for a great many minutes Cohill said nothing.

Then he said, "All he has said so far is that he is a very, very brave man." Thursday nodded, and Stone Buffalo talked on for many more minutes. Cohill said, "He says now that he is also a very great hunter—he and his whole tribe." Again Thursday nodded, and Stone Buffalo

told how the railroads and the white hunters had killed off the buffalo, and how he alone, as medicine chief, could bring them back again.

Suddenly Cohill whispered, "I don't like any of it, sir. He's covering up for time. This is an insolent attempt at reconnaissance, I believe."

"Stop it then." Thursday's voice was hard.

"It will have to run out—protocol requires it—you cannot stop him now until he is finished. That would be a grave insult."

"Is there anyone at Fort Starke who recognizes an order when it is given?"

Cohill rose to his feet. Stone Buffalo stopped talking in vibrant anger. Major Thursday leaned forward. "Cohill, no preliminary nonsense with him, no ceremonial phrasing. Straight from the shoulder as I tell you, do you hear me? They are recalcitrant swine. They must feel it."

Cohill stood there, white-faced. He said, "I hear you, sir. What shall I tell them?"

"Tell them I find them without honor or manhood. Tell them it is written on sacred paper that they will remain on their reservation. That they have broken this promise puts them beneath fighting men's contempt, makes them turkey-eating women. Tell them they are not talking to me, but to the United States. Tell them the United States orders them to leave here at once. They will break camp at dawn and return to the reservation, for I move in to their camp site at daylight," and Major Thursday turned his back and stalked off into the darkness, calling sharply for the officer of the guard.

Clay Sitterding, D'Arcy Topliff and Flint Cohill squatted in the white mists, gulping their steaming coffee. The morning was a gaunt old woman in the shadows, standing there wrapped in a shawl, seeing what she would not see again. A thin old woman with sadness in

her face, and courage and the overpowering knowledge of life's inevitable defeat.

Ten years and better had passed under the bridges of Sitterding, Topliff and Cohill. Ten knowledgeable years of hard and bitter learning. They could have talked. "I told him not to receive them, not to smoke with them last night, and he shut me up." They could have said, "One hundred rounds of ammunition instead of three!" But you learn not to talk before you can ever learn other things. Behind them in the mists there was the movement of many men, but not enough men now, because the shock action of cavalry at one to three is suicidal madness without surprise. Who cares what you have commanded before, or what people think of you, or what other wars you have fought in? In war it is always what happens now! What happens next! Who commands here . . . now!

Sitterding finished his bitter coffee and for one brief instant he could feel the harsh winds of March on his face—the winds that howl up the Hudson River Valley and cut across the parade ground at the Academy like canister fired at zero elevation. There had been a time when the melting heat of Starke had made him forget the chilled wine of those Eastern winds.

D'Arcy Topliff said, "I wish I'd married the one rich woman I ever met! I'd be a banker in St. Louis this morning, and still in bed."

Cohill tried to laugh, but some ancient instinct within him had dried up the wells of his laughter. The curtain was down across the back of his mind, shutting him off from all he had been, so that he could only move forward. Some men are fortunate that way.

"Here we go," he said quietly, and with both hands he pressed briefly on the shoulders of the other two. "Just remember that the escort train is in mobile reserve, and if you get a fight, save me a piece."

You have seen it so often in the Jonathan Redfield print. The powder-blue trace of Crazy Man Creek against the burnt yellow grass on the rising ground behind. The dead of Company A stripped naked and scalped, their heads looking like faces screaming in beards. Major Thursday, empty gun in hand, dying gloriously with what is left of Company B, in an attempt to rally and save the colors, but this is how it happened. *This is how it happened:*

The column moved out with the mists of the morning still cold, moved out in a long breath of saddle soap on still-stiffened leather, rough wool, not yet sweat-damp, and the thin brown of gun oil. Dog-faced cavalry, the like of which has passed from the knowledge of the world. Up the gently sloping rise from the bivouac to the ridge line above Crazy Man Creek. Across the hogback ridge, outlined against the spreading yellow light that rimmed the eastern horizon. Guidons, booted carbine butts, hats creased fore and aft, backs arched and colors flying. There are cowpokes who will tell you solemnly that sometimes when a murderous thunderstorm howls down the valley, you can see them again crossing that ridge. That you can hear the brass scream of the charge echoing. But that is not so, for soldiers pass once only, and all that they ever leave behind is memory. "Close up the intervals! Close up!"

The point crossed the ridge first and wound on down the slope where the trail weaves onto high and rock-strewn ground before it reaches the ford. The point went on through and forded Crazy Man and signaled back from the other side to Lieutenant Sitterding at the head of A. All clear.

Sitterding gave the word, and A crossed the ridge and started down, with B, under D'Arcy Topliff, three hundred yards behind and echeloned three hundred yards

to the left, west, rear. Which was by explicit order of Owen Thursday. So much for the creek side of the ridge. On the bivouac side, there was still Flintridge Cohill and the wagon train and the mounted guards from C. Flintridge Cohill was held up as soon as he started . . . by a broken linchpin.

Owen Thursday, sitting his horse high on the sky line, was the only man who could see the entire command. He sat there against the whitening dawn as if he had chosen that position to sit on and wait for it.

Company A rode on slowly down into the defile, breakfasts still warm in stomachs, saddles softening to the butt, muscles limbering up to the new day's work. Then unbelievably there was a sudden ring of fire in their faces and on both flanks. One hundred and eighty degrees of fire—half the horizon around—splintered around them like dry and rotted timber, tearing around them like grommets ripped from heavy cloth. Clay Sitterding and forty-two men were down. Half their mounts, reeling, galloping, were thrashing back over them, trying to get out and up the slope again.

Flint Cohill, blind to the sight of it because the ridge line masked it, knew it desperately for what it might be. He stared into his farrier sergeant's face.

He said, "Sergeant Magee, fix that pin and hold the train here on my order!"

And he spurred furiously toward the ridge top. Almost it was as if Owen Thursday were trying to escape facing him. He seemed to wait until he could wait no longer, until Cohill was almost to him, then he sank his rowels into his horse and plunged him headlong down the opposite side toward the Valley of the Shadow. But not soon enough, for Cohill saw what he was going to do. Cohill saw it. With no further reconnaissance and no clear idea of what he was up against, with no brief withdrawal to

reform, with all of A lying dead now in the defile for everyone to see, Thursday screamed to Topliff to deploy B and to hit the sides of the defile at the gallop as foragers.

Cohill turned his back. "Magee," he shouted through cupped hands, "get the wagons up here fast!"

Then Cohill turned again, and this time he saw that murderous ring of fire from the rocks, half a full circle round, and there were tears within him that would never, as long as he lived, quite leave him again. In that moment he knew that the train and the mounted guards were all that there was left; that he alone on an open ridge line was all that remained of the sovereign dignity of the United States for hundreds of miles around. But he was saying it this way—he was saying it out loud, "D'Arcy's gone . . . and Clay's gone . . . but no man gets me off this ridge line . . . no man!"

"Sergeant Magee, take the wagon boxes from the beds! Put one here! . . . put one twenty full paces to the left! . . . One down there where you're standing, and one here to the right! All hands turn to, to dig rifle pits between the boxes! Turn in all canteens! Corral all animals on the rope, down the backslope!"

It's not always in the book. It's a hundred thousand years. It's a heritage and a curse and the white man's burden. It's Cannae and Agincourt and Wagram and Princeton, and it's the shambles of Shiloh. With Flint Cohill it was thirty-one men on a hogback ridge and the thought in his angry mind that he'd never live now to be a general officer, but he'd die the best damned first lieutenant of cavalry that the world could find to do the job that morning!

Lying on the ridge top, searching the ghastly valley below with his glasses, Flint saw the last of it—an officer and three men and the colors on their broken staff. He couldn't swear to it, but it looked like Clay Sitterding

and old Sergeant Shattuck and Aiken and Sergeant Ershick. Only for a minute before they went down under the final rush. Then Stone Buffalo's warriors were overrunning the dead of both A and B, pincushioning the bodies with arrows. Scalping. Lopping off a foot and the right hand, so that the spirits, too, would suffer mutilation and never fight again. Then the Indians withdrew to consider the ridge top, and, by the dust presently, they were commencing to ring it, to cut it off from water, to wither it for the kill.

Cohill called young Brailey over and squatted down with him. "Brailey, you're a show-off and a braggart, and I never thought I'd have the right job for you. But I have. Take the best horse on the picket line. Make Fort Starke. Tell 'em where we are, and tell 'em we may still be alive if they hurry. I'm making you corporal, but you'll never draw a dime of pay if we're dead when you get back. Move out and make it so."

Shortly after that, Cohill saw the tiny group far below, struggling painfully up the draw. Six men, crawling, dragging two, stumbling. Hatless and bleeding. Stopping exhausted, faces downward; starting up the slow way once again. Cohill finally got down to them. D'Arcy Topliff, hit four times and barely breathing. Glastonby of the red hair, from A. "Sir, we didn't have a chance!"—crying every time he tried to speak. Pointing back helplessly. Cursing, with the tears greasing the filth of his cheeks. "Get Mr. Topliff to the ridge top, Glastonby." And there were Moore and Stonesifer and Coyne, out of B, dragging Bittendorfer with them. Shocked speechless. Bleeding. Obeying like whipped beasts. "Go on up, all of you, straight up the draw."

Cohill said that, because at that moment he saw the seventh man, still far below them. "And tell Sergeant Magee I'll be along in a few minutes . . . a few minutes be

hind you," and he scrambled on down the draw until he was crouched beside Owen Thursday.

"Cohill, sir."

Thursday turned and looked at him as if he had never seen him before in his life. The light was gone from his eyes and the pride was dead in him at last. All of his days the ghost of today had ridden with him, mocking his pride, pointing the finger of scorn at his personal ambition. General Thursday, of Clarke's Corps, of Cumberland Station, of Sudler's Mountain, with luck and the devil to help and a hero's crown for the snatching!

But today, the ghost was come alive at the cost of seventy-two men lying dead, through the ignorance that is pride's handmaiden, the stubbornness that is ambition's mistress.

"I am dug in on the ridge top," Cohill said, "with the wagon boxes loopholed, and rifle pits. I have thirty-seven men, one officer and one man badly wounded. I have water and ammunition——"

"Get ready to move out at once," Thursday said. "We must try to cut back into Fort Starke." But his voice broke.

Flint Cohill shook his head. "Stone Buffalo is already ringing the position. We cannot leave that ridge top. If we try, we'll be cut to ribbons before we've gone ten miles."

"Get ready to move out, Mr. Cohill!" The voice was a high and broken whine.

"I've sent a courier to Starke, sir. I believe he'll get through. I believe Captain Joplyn can get here in five days. I can hold until then. Besides, we've no other choice! General——" Cohill said it deliberately, but there was no defiance in it, no indictment. He was almost pleading. "General, there are two dead companies down there—all the friends I've had in the world for years."



He snagged his hand gun from his holster, spun it until it was butt first toward Thursday, then he thrust it out and held it. "You don't have to tell me again, but A and B are all present or accounted for, and so am I! I'll move out to your order, but only under arrest, sir! Only under arrest!"

Thursday rose slowly to his feet, Cohill's gun in hand. "I've had all I can have," he said softly; "this is where the road stops at last." His eyes were completely empty as Flint looked into them. The light was gone forever. "Mr. Cohill, your ridge top. I'm going back down. Good luck."

"Mr. Sitterding can't talk, sir, nor can Shattuck nor Ershick nor Aiken, and you have my word of honor that I won't . . . ever . . . for the good of the service." Flint whispered it almost.

And that is how they found Owen Thursday when the flying column from Starke relieved Cohill's party on the fifth day.

He was dead with the little group that had defended the colors—dead beside Sitterding, Shattuck, Ershick and Aiken—shot in the right ear, with the gun held so close that the contract surgeon couldn't have missed knowing that the major had squeezed off the trigger himself. But Flintridge Cohill got there first, for there are ways of living that are finer than the men who try to live them, and a regiment has honor that no man may usurp as his personal property. Glory is a jade of the streets who can be bought for a price by anyone who wants her. Thursday wanted her, but his pockets were empty, so Cohill lent him the two dollars for posterity. Cohill took his own gun from Thursday's dead hand. He threw out the cylinder and jerked the five ball cartridges and the one empty case into his left hand. He spun the gun far out into Crazy Man Creek.

The five ball cartridges, he dropped one by one as he

moved away, but the empty cartridge case he always carried with him for the rest of his life, for fingering it in his pocket always gave him courage in moments when he needed it—when the way was dark and decisions not easy.

And it was Cohill, years later, who reconstructed the scene for Jonathan Redfield to paint. "Major Thursday," he said, "was a very gallant officer. We found him dead with the little group that defended the colors—with Lieutenant Sitterding and Sergeants Shattuck and Ershick and Private Aiken. No man could have wished for more."

But even when he was very old, Cohill always looked sharply at anyone who said, "for the good of the service," and he always said, "What exactly does that mean to you, sir?"

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